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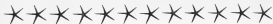
TEMPTRESS of the TOWER of  
TORTURE and SIN—R.E.Howard



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—D.A.W.



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FANTASY READER

No. 14

*Edited by*  
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★

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JAMES FRANCIS DWYER	RAY CUMMINGS
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★

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# Contents and Acknowledgments

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TEMPTRESS OF THE TOWER OF TORTURE AND SIN <i>by Robert E. Howard</i> .....	3
Copyright, 1939, by Popular Fiction Publishing Company. Reprinted by permission of the Estate of Robert E. Howard.	
YLLA <i>by Ray Bradbury</i> .....	20
Copyright, 1950, by Ray Bradbury. Reprinted by permission of Harold Matson.	
THE THREE EYED MAN <i>by Ray Cummings</i> .....	30
Copyright, 1921, by Ray Cummings. Reprinted by permission of the author.	
THE CAVE OF THE INVISIBLE <i>by James Francis Dwyer</i> .....	40
Copyright, 1937, by Blue Book Magazine. Reprinted by permission of the author.	
GUARD IN THE DARK <i>by Allison V. Harding</i> .....	51
Copyright, 1944, by Weird Tales.	
THE STILL, SMALL VOICE <i>by Clive G. B. Jackson</i> .....	63
Copyright, 1950, by Avon Novels, Inc.	
THE CURSE OF YIG <i>by Zealia Brown Bishop</i> .....	66
Copyright, 1929, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, for Weird Tales; copyright, 1915, by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei. By permission of Arkham House and Mrs. Zealia Bishop.	
THE YEAST MEN <i>by David H. Keller, M.D.</i> .....	79
Copyright, 1923, by E. P. Co., Inc.; copyright, 1950, by David H. Keller for "Tales From Underwood." By permission of Arkham House.	
THE HEADLESS MILLER OF KOBOLD'S KEEP <i>by Irvin Ashkenazy</i> ..	95
Copyright, 1957, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, for Weird Tales magazine.	
THE SHADOWS <i>by Henry S. Whitehead</i> .....	110
Copyright, 1927, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company; copyright, 1944, by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei for "Jumboe and Other Uncanny Tales." By permission of Arkham House.	

# Temptress of the Tower of Torture and Sin

by Robert E. Howard

*The lure of lost lands, the finding of new worlds to conquer, is one of the factors inherent in the movement of progress. And the fact that we have apparently exhausted the possibilities of geographical discoveries Columbusian probably plays a part in the fascination such stories as Tarzan's adventures in "Darkest Africa" hold. It was inevitable that Robert E. Howard, for whom the past held a deep romantic grip, would try his hand at dreaming up a lost city of the ancients still awaiting its modern discoverer. This fascinating story appeared in the first issue of the short-lived companion magazine to Weird Tales called Oriental Stories. As such it is probably unknown to most acid fans themselves, and will come to over ninety-nine per cent of the readers as a brand new Robert E. Howard fantasy adventure.*

MASKAT, like many another port, is a haven for the drifters of many nations who bring their tribal customs and peculiarities with them. Turk rubs shoulders with Greek and Arab squabbles with Hindoo. The tongues of half the Orient resound in the loud smelly bazaar. Therefore it did not seem particularly incongruous to hear, as I leaned on a bar tended by a smirking Eurasian, the musical notes of a Chinese gong sound clearly through the lazy hum of native traffic. There was certainly nothing so startling in those mellow tones that the big Englishman next to me should start and swear and spill his whiskey-and-soda on my sleeve.

He apologized and berated his clumsiness with honest profanity, but I saw he was shaken. He interested me as his type always does—a fine upstanding fellow he was, over six feet tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, heavy-limbed, the perfect fighting man, brown-faced, blue-eyed and tawny-haired. His breed is old as Europe, and the man himself brought to mind vague legendary characters—Hengist, Hereward, Cedric—born rovers and fighters of the original barbarian stock.

I saw, furthermore, that he was in a mood to talk. I introduced myself, ordered drinks and waited. My specimen thanked me, mustered to himself, quaffed his liquor hastily and spoke abruptly:

"You're wondering why a grown man should be so suddenly upset by such

a small thing—well, I admit that damned gong gave me a start. It's that fool Yotai Lao, bringing his nasty joss sticks and Buddhas into a decent town—for a half-penny I'd bribe some Modern fanatic to cut his yellow throat and sink his confounded gong into the gulf. And I'll tell you why I hate the thing.

"My name," he said, "is Bill Kirby. It was in Jibuti on the Gulf of Aden that I met John Conrad. A slim, keen-eyed young New Englander he was—professor too, for all his youth. Victim of obsession also, like most of his kind. He was a student of bug, and it was a particular bug that had brought him to the East Coast; or rather, the hope of the blooming beast, for he never found it. It was almost uncanny to see the chap work himself into a blaze of enthusiasm when speaking on his favorite subject. No doubt he could have taught me much I should know, but insects are not among my enthusiasms, and he talked, dreamed and thought of little else at first. . . .

"Well, we paired off well from the start. He had money and ambitions and I had a bit of experience and a roving foot. We got together a small, modest but efficient safari and wandered down into the back country of Somaliland. Now you'll hear it spoken today that this country has been exhaustively explored and I can prove that statement to be a lie. We found things that no white man has ever dreamed of.

"We had trekked for the best part of a month and had gotten into a part of the country I knew was unknown to the average explorer. The veldt and thorn forests gave way to what approached real jungle and what natives we saw were a thick-lipped, low-browed, dog-toothed breed—not like the Somali at all. We wandered on though, and our porters and askari began muttering among themselves. Some of the black fellows had been hobnobbing with them and telling them tales that frightened them from going on. Our men wouldn't talk to me or Conrad about it, but we had a camp servant, a half-caste named Selim, and I told him to see what he could learn. That night he came to my tent. We had pitched camp in a sort of big glade and had built a thorn boma; for the lions were raising merry Cain in the bush.

"'Master,' he said in the mongrel English he was so proud of, 'them black fella he is scaring the porters and askari with bad ju-ju talk. They be tell about a mighty ju-ju curse on the country in which we go to, and—'

"He stopped short, turned ashy, and my head jerked up. Out of the dim, jungle-haunted mazes of the south whispered a haunting voice. Like the echo of an echo it was, yet strangely distinct, deep, vibrant, melodious. I stepped from my tent and saw Conrad standing before a fire, taut and tense as a hunting hound.

"'Did you hear that?' he asked. 'What was it?'

"'A native drum,' I answered—but we both knew I lied. The noise and chatter of our natives about their cooking-fires had ceased as if they had all died suddenly.

"We heard nothing more of it that night, but the next morning we found ourselves deserted. The black boys had decamped with all the luggage they could lay hand to. We held a council of war, Conrad, Selim and I. The half-caste was scared pink, but the pride of his white blood kept him carrying on.

"'What now?' I asked Conrad. 'We've our guns and enough supplies to

give us a sporting chance of reaching the coast.'

"Listen!" he raised his hand. Out across the bush-country throbbed again that haunting whisper. "We'll go on. I'll never rest until I know what makes that sound. I never heard anything like it in the world before."

"The jungle will pick our bally bones," I said. He shook his head.

"Listen!" said he.

"It was like a call. It got into your blood. It drew you as a fakir's music draws a cobra. I knew it was madness. But I didn't argue. We cached most of our duffle and started on. Each night we built a thorn boma and sat inside it while the big cats yowled and grunted outside. And ever clearer as we worked deeper and deeper in the jungle mazes, we heard that voice. It was deep, mellow, musical. It made you dream strange things; it was pregnant with vast age. The lost glories of antiquity whispered in its blooming. It centered in its resonance all the yearning and mystery of life, all the magic soul of the East. I awoke in the middle of night to listen to its whispering echoes, and slept to dreams of sky-towering minarets, of long ranks of bowing, brown-skinned worshippers, of purple-canopied peacock thrones and thundering golden chariots.

"Conrad had found something at last that rivalled his infernal bugs in his interest. He didn't talk much; he hunted insects in an absent-minded way. All day he would seem to be in an attitude of listening, and when the deep golden notes would roll out across the jungle, he would tense like a hunting dog on the scent, while into his eyes would steal a look strange for a civilized professor. By Jove, it's curious to see some ancient primal influence steal through the veneer of a cold-blooded scientist's soul and touch the red flow of life beneath! It was new and strange to Conrad; here was something he couldn't explain away with his new-fangled, bloodless psychology.

"Well, we wandered on in that mad search—for it's the white man's curse to go into Hell to satisfy his curiosity. Then in the gray light of an early dawn the camp was rushed. There was no fight. We were simply flooded and submerged by numbers. They must have stolen up and surrounded us on all sides; for the first thing I knew, the camp was full of fantastic figures and there were half a dozen spears at my throat. It rasped me terribly to give up without a shot fired, but there was no bettering it, and I cursed myself for not having kept a better lookout. We should have expected something of the kind, with that devilish chiming in the south.

"There were at least a hundred of them, and I got a chill when I looked at them closely. They weren't black boys and they weren't Arabs. They were lean men of middle height, light yellowish, with dark eyes and big noses. They wore no beards and their heads were close-shaven. They were clad in a sort of tunic, belted at the waist with a wide leather girdle, and sandals. They also wore a queer kind of iron helmet, peaked at the top, open in front and coming down nearly to their shoulders behind and at the sides. They carried big metal-braced shields, nearly square and were armed with narrow-bladed spears, strangely made bows and arrows, and short straight swords as I had never seen before—or since.

"They bound Conrad and me hand and foot and they butchered Selim

then and there—cut his throat like a pig while he kicked and howled. A sickening sight—Conrad nearly fainted and I dare say I looked a bit pale myself. Then they set out in the direction we had been heading, making us walk between them, with our hands tied behind our backs and their spears threatening us. They brought along our scanty dunnage, but from the way they carried the guns I didn't believe they knew what those were for. Scarcely a word had been spoken between them and when I essayed various dialects I only got the prod of a spear-point. Their silence was a bit ghostly and altogether ghastly. I felt as if we'd been captured by a band of spooks.

"I didn't know what to make of them. They had the look of the Orient about them but not the Orient with which I was familiar, if you understand me. Africa is of the East but not one with it. They looked no more African than a Chinaman does. This is hard to explain. But I'll say this: Tokyo is Eastern, and Benares is equally so, but Benares symbolizes a different, older phase of the Orient, while Peking represents still another, and older one. These men were of an Orient I had never known; they were part of an East older than Persia—older than Assyria—older than Babylon! I felt it about them like an aura and I shuddered from the gulfs of Time they symbolized. Yet it fascinated me, too. Beneath the Gothic arches of an age-old jungle, speared along by silent Orientals whose type has been forgotten for God knows how many eons, a man can have fantastic thoughts. I almost wondered if these fellows were real, or but the ghosts of warriors dead four thousand years!

"The trees began to thin and the ground sloped upward. At last we came out upon a sort of cliff and saw a sight that made us gasp. We were looking into a big valley surrounded entirely by high, steep cliffs, through which various streams had cut narrow canyons to feed a good-sized lake in the center of the valley. In the center of the lake was an island and on that island was a temple and at the farther end of the lake was a city! No native village of mud and bamboo, either. This seemed to be of stone, yellowish-brown in color.

"The city was walled and consisted of square-built, flat-topped houses, some apparently three or four stories high. All the shores of the lake were in cultivation and the fields were green and flourishing, fed by artificial ditches. They had a system of irrigation that amazed me. But the most astonishing thing was the temple on the island.

"I gasped, gaped and blinked. It was the Tower of Babel true to life! Not as tall or as big as I'd imagined it, but some ten tiers high and sullen and massive just like the pictures, with that same intangible impression of evil hovering over it.

"Then as we stood there, from that vast pile of masonry there floated out across the lake that deep resonant booming—close and clear now—and the very cliffs seemed to quiver with the vibrations of that music-laden air. I stole a glance at Conrad; he looked all at sea. He was of that class of scientists who have the universe classified and pigeonholed and everything in its proper little nook. By Jove! It knocks them in a heap to be confronted with the paradoxical-unexplainable-shouldn't-be more than it does common chaps like you and me, who haven't much preconceived ideas of things in general.



"The soldiers took us down a stairway cut into the solid rock of the cliffs and we went through irrigated fields where shaven-headed men and dark-eyed women paused in their work to stare curiously at us. They took us to a huge, iron-braced gate where a small body of soldiers equipped like our captors challenged them, and after a short parley we were escorted into the city. It was much like any other Eastern city—men, women and children going to and fro, arguing, buying and selling. But all in all, it had that same effect of apartness—of vast antiquity. I couldn't classify the architecture any more than I could understand the language. The only things I could think of as I stared at those squat, square buildings was the huts certain low-caste, mongrel peoples still build in the valley of the Euphrates in Mesopotamia. Those huts might be a degraded evolution from the architecture in that strange African city.

"Our captors took us straight to the largest building in the city, and while we marched along the streets, we discovered that the houses and walls were not of stone after all, but a sort of brick. We were taken into a huge-columned hall before which stood ranks of silent soldiery, and taken before a dais up which led broad steps. Armed warriors stood behind and on either side of a throne, a scribe stood beside it, girls clad in enrich-plumes lounged on the broad steps, and on the throne sat a grim-eyed devil who alone of all the men of that fantastic city wore his hair long. He was black-bearded, wore a sort of crown and had the haughtiest, cruelest face I ever saw on any man. An Arab sheikh or Turkish shah was a lamb beside him. He reminded me of some artist's conception of Belshazzar or the Pharaohs—a king who was more than a king in his own mind and the eyes of his people—a king who was at once king and high priest and god.

"Our escort promptly prostrated themselves before him and knocked their heads on the matting until he spoke a languid word to the scribe and this personage signed for them to rise. They rose, and the leader began a long rignarole to the king, while the scribe scratched away like mad on a clay tablet and Conrad and I stood there like a pair of blooming gaping jackasses, wondering what it was all about. Then I heard a word repeated continually, and each time he spoke it, he indicated us. The word sounded like 'Akkadian,' and suddenly my brain reeled with the possibilities it betokened. It couldn't be—yet it had to be!

"Not wanting to break in on the conversation and maybe lose my bulky head, I said nothing, and at last the king gestured and spoke, the soldiers bowed again and seizing us, hustled us roughly from the royal presence into a columned corridor, across a huge chamber and into a small cell where they thrust us and locked the door. There was only a heavy bench and one window, closely barred.

"'My heavens, Bill,' exclaimed Conrad, 'who could have imagined anything equal to this? It's like a nightmare—or a tale from *The Arabian Nights*! Where are we? Who are these people?'

"'You won't believe me,' I said, 'but—you've read of the ancient empire of Sumeria?'

"'Certainly; it flourished in Mesopotamia some four thousand years ago.

But what—by Jove! he broke off, staring at me wide-eyed as the connection struck him.

"I leave it to you what the descendants of an Asia-Minor kingdom are doing in East Africa," I said, feeling for my pipe, "but it must be—the Sumerians built their cities of sun-dried brick. I saw men making bricks and stacking them up so dry along the lake shore. The mud is remarkably like that you find in the Tigris and Euphrates valley. Likely that's why these chaps settled here. The Sumerians wrote on clay tablets by scratching the surface with a sharp point just as the chap was doing in the throne room.

"Then look at their arms, dress and physiognomy. I've seen their art carved on stone and pottery and wondered if those big noses were part of their faces or part of their helmets. And look at that temple in the lake! A small counterpart of the temple reared to the god El-il in Nippur—which probably started the myth of the Tower of Babel.

"But the thing that clinches it is the fact that they referred to us as Akkadians. Their empire was conquered and subjugated by Sargon of Akkad in 2750 B.C. If these are descendants of a band who fled their conqueror, it's natural that, pent in these hinterlands and separated from the rest of the world, they'd come to call all outsiders Akkadians, much as secluded Oriental nations call all Europeans Franks in memory of Martel's warriors who routed them at Tours.

"Why do you suppose they haven't been discovered before now?"

"Well, if any white man's been here before, they took good care he didn't get out to tell his tale, I doubt if they wander much; probably think the outside world's overrun with bloodthirsty Akkadians."

"At this moment the door of our cell opened to admit a slim young girl, clad only in a girdle of silk and golden breastplates. She brought us food and wine, and I noted how lingeringly she gazed at Conrad. And to my surprise she spoke to us in fair Somali.

"Where . . . we?" I asked. "What are they going to do? Who are you?"

"I am Naluna, the dancer of El-il," she answered—and she looked it—like as a she-panther she was. "I am sorry to see you in this place, no Akkadian goes forth from here alive."

"Nice friendly sort of chaps," I grunted, but glad to find some one I could talk to and understand. "And what's the name of the city?"

"This is Eridu," she said. "Our ancestors came here many ages ago from ancient Sumer, many moons to the East. They were driven by a great and powerful king, Sargon of the Akkadians—desert people. But our ancestors would not be slaves like their kin, so they fled, thousands of them in one great band, and traversed many strange, savage countries before they came to this land."

"Beyond that her knowledge was very vague and mixed up with myths and improbable legends. Conrad and I discussed it afterward, wondering if the old Sumerians came down the west coast of Arabia and crossed the Red Sea about where Mocha is now, or if they went over the Isthmus of Suez and came down on the African side. I'm inclined to the last opinion. Likely the Egyptians met them as they came out of Asia Minor and chased them south.

Conrad thought they might have made most of the trip by water, because, as he said, the Persian Gulf ran up something like a hundred and thirty miles farther than it does now, and Old Eridu was a seaport town. But just at the moment something else was on my mind.

"Where did you learn to speak Sounali?" I asked Naluna.

"When I was little," she answered, "I wandered out of the valley and into the jungle where a band of raiding black men caught me. They sold me to a tribe who lived near the coast and I spent my childhood among them. But when I had grown into girlhood I remembered Eridu and one day I stole a camel and rode across many leagues of veldt and jungle and so came again to the city of my birth. In all Eridu I alone can speak a tongue not mine own, except for the black slaves—and they speak not all, for we cut out their tongues when we capture them. The people of Eridu go not forth beyond the jungles and they traffic not with the black peoples who sometimes come against us, except as they take a few slaves."

"I asked her why they killed our camp servant and she said that it was forbidden for blacks and whites to mate in Eridu and the offspring of such union was not allowed to live. They didn't like the poor beggar's color."

"Naluna could tell us little of the history of the city since its founding, outside the events that had happened in her own memory—which dealt mainly with scattered raids by a cannibalistic tribe living in the jungles to the south, petty intrigues of court and temple, crop failures and the like—the scope of a woman's life in the East is much the same, whether in the palace of Akbar, Cyrus or Ashurbanipal. But I learned that the ruler's name was Sostorus and that he was both high priest and king—just as the rulers were in old Sumer, four thousand years ago. El-il was their god, who abode in the temple in the lake, and the deep booming we had heard was, Naluna said, the voice of the god."

"At last she rose to go, casting a wistful look at Conrad, who sat like a man in a trance—for once his confounded bugs were clean out of his mind."

"Well," said I, "what d'you think of it, young fella-me-lad?"

"It's incredible," said he, shaking his head. "It's absurd—an intelligent tribe living here four thousand years and never advancing beyond their ancestors."

"You're stung with the hug of progress," I told him cynically, crumpling my pipe bowl full of weed. "You're thinking of the mushroom growth of your own country. You can't generalize on an Oriental from a Western viewpoint. What about China's famous long sleep? As for these chaps, you forget they're no tribe but the tag end of a civilization that lasted longer than any has lasted since. They passed the peak of their progress thousands of years ago. With no intercourse with the outside world and no new blood to stir them up, these people are slowly sinking in the scale. I'd wager their culture and art are far inferior to that of their ancestors."

"Then why haven't they lapsed into complete barbarism?"

"Maybe they have, to all practical purposes," I answered, beginning to draw on my old pipe. "They don't strike me as being quite the proper thing for offsprings of an ancient and honorable civilization. But remember they

grew slowly and their retrogression is bound to be equally slow. Sumerian culture was unusually virile. Its influence is felt in Asia Minor today. The Sumerians had their civilization when our bloomin' ancestors were scrapping with cave bears and sabertooth tigers, so to speak. At least the Europeans hadn't passed the first milestones on the road to progress, whoever their animal neighbors were. Old Eridu was a seaport of consequence as early as 6000 B.C. From then to 2750 B.C. is a bit of time for any empire. What other empire stood as long as the Sumerian? The Akkadian dynasty established by Sargon stood two hundred years before it was overthrown by another Semitic people, the Babylonians, who borrowed their culture from Akkadian Sumer just as Rome later stole hers from Greece; the Hamitic Kassite dynasty supplanted the original Babylonian, the Assyrian and the Chaldean followed—well, you know the rapid succession of dynasty on dynasty in Asia Minor, one Semitic people overthrowing another, until the real conquerors hove in view of the Eastern horizon—the Medes and Persians—who were destined to last scarcely longer than their victims.

"Compare each fleeting kingdom with the long dream reign of the ancient pre-Semitic Sumerians! We think the Minoan Age of Crete is a long time back, but the Sumerian empire of Erech was already beginning to decay before the rising power of Sumerian Nippur, before the ancestors of the Cretans had emerged from the Neolithic Age. The Sumerians had something the succeeding Hamites, Semites and Aryans lacked. They were stable. They grew slowly and if left alone would have decayed as slowly as these fellows are decaying. Still and all, I note these chaps have made one advancement—notice their weapons?

"Old Sumer was in Bronze Age. The Assyrians were the first to use iron for anything besides ornaments. But these lads have learned to work iron ore. I daresay."

"But the mystery of Sumer still remains," Conrad broke in. "Who are they? Whence did they come? Some authorities maintain they were of Dravidian origin, akin to the Basques—"

"It won't stick, me lad," said L. "Even allowing for possible admixture of Aryan or Turanian blood in the Dravidian descendants, you can see at a glance these people are not of the same race."

"But their language—" Conrad began arguing, which is a fair way to pass the time while you're waiting to be put in the cooking-pot, but doesn't prove much except to strengthen your own original ideas.

"Naluna came again about sunset with food, and this time she sat down by Conrad and watched him eat. Seeing her sitting thus, elbows on knees and chin on hands, devouring him with her large, lustrous dark eyes, I said to the professor in English, so she wouldn't understand: 'The girl's badly smitten with you; play up to her. She's our only chance.'

"He blushed like a blooming school girl. 'I've a fiancée back in the States,'

"'Blas't your fiancée,' I said. 'Is it she that's going to keep the bally heads on our blightin' shoulders? I tell you this girl's sily over you. Ask her what they're going to do with us.'

"He did so and Naluna said: 'Your fate lies in the lap of El-il.'"

"'And the brain of Sostoras,' I muttered. 'Naluna, what was done with the guns that were taken from us?'"

"She replied that they were hung in the temple of El-il as trophies of victory. None of the Sumerians was aware of their purpose. I asked her if the natives they sometimes fought had never used guns and she said no. I could easily believe that, seeing that there are many wild tribes in those hinterlands who've scarcely seen a single white man. But it seemed incredible that some of the Arabs who've raided back and forth across Somaliland for a thousand years hadn't stumbled onto Eridu and shot it up. But it turned out to be true—just one of those peculiar quirks and back-oddies in events like the wolves and wildcats you still find in New York State, or those queer pre-Aryan peoples you come onto in small communities in the hills of Connaught and Galway. I'm certain that big slave raids had passed within a few miles of Eridu, yet the Arabs had never found it and impressed on them the meaning of firearms.

"So I told Conrad: 'Play up to her, you chump! If you can persuade her to slip us a gun, we've a sporting chance.'"

"So Conrad took heart and began talking to Naluna in a nervous sort of manner. Just how he'd have come out, I can't say, for he was little of the Don Juan, but Naluna snuggled up to him, much to his embarrassment, listening to his stumbling Somali with her soul in her eyes. Love blossoms suddenly and unexpectedly in the East.

"However, a peremptory voice outside our cell made Naluna jump half out of her skin and sent her scurrying, but as she went she pressed Conrad's hand and whispered something in his ear that we couldn't understand, but it sounded highly passionate.

"Shortly after she had left, the cell opened again and there stood a file of silent dark-skinned warriors. A sort of chief, whom the rest addressed as Gorat, motioned us to come out. Then down a long, dim colonnaded corridor we went, in perfect silence except for the soft scruff of their sandals and the tramp of our boots on the tiling. An occasional torch flaring on the walls or in a niche of the columns lighted the way vaguely. At last we came out into the empty streets of the silent city. No sentry paced the streets or the walls, no lights showed from inside the flat-topped houses. It was like walking a street in a ghost city. Whether every night in Eridu was like that or whether the people kept indoors because it was a special and awesome occasion, I haven't any idea.

"We went on down the streets toward the lake side of the town. There we passed through a small gate in the wall—over which, I noted with a slight shudder, a grinning skull was carved—and found ourselves outside the city. A broad flight of steps led down to the water's edge and the spears at our backs guided us down them. There a boat waited, a strange high-prowed affair whose prototype must have plied the Persian Gulf in the days of Old Eridu.

"Four black men rested on their oars, and when they opened their mouths I saw their tongues had been cut out. We were taken into the boat, our guards got in and we started a strange journey. Out on the silent lake we

moved like a dream, whose silence was broken only by the low rippling of the long, slim, golden-worked oars through the water. The stars flocked the deep blue gulf of the lake with silver points. I looked back and saw the great dark bulk of the temple loom against the stars. The naked black mutes pulled the shining oars and the silent warriors sat before and behind us with their spears, helms and shields. It was like the dream of some fabulous city of Haroun-al-Raschid's time, or of Subhan-ben-Daoud's, and I thought how blooming incongruous Conrad and I looked in that setting, with our boots and dingy, tattered khakis.

"We landed on the island and I saw it was girdled with masonry—built up from the water's edge in broad flights of steps which circled the entire island. The whole seemed older, even, than the city—the Sumerians must have built it when they first found the valley, before they began on the city itself.

"We went up the steps, that were worn deep by countless feet, to a huge set of iron doors in the temple, and here Gorat laid down his spear and shield, dropped on his belly and knocked his helmeted head on the great sill. Some one must have been watching from a loophole, for from the top of the tower sounded one deep golden note and the doors swung silently open to disclose a dim, torch-lighted entrance. Gorat rose and led the way, we following with those confounded spears pricking our backs.

"We mounted a flight of stairs and came onto a series of galleries built on the inside of each tier and winding around and up. Looking up, it seemed much higher and bigger than it had seemed from without, and the vague, half-lighted gloom, the silence and the mystery gave me the shudders. Conrad's face gleamed white in the semi-darkness. The shadows of past ages crowded in upon us, chaotic and horrific, and I felt as though the ghosts of all the priests and victims who had walked those galleries for four thousand years were keeping pace with us. The vast wings of dark, forgotten gods hovered over that hideous pile of antiquity.

"We came out on the highest tier. There were three circles of tall columns, one inside the other—and I want to say that for columns built of sun-dried brick, these were curiously symmetrical. But there was none of the grace and open beauty of, say, Greek architecture. This was grim, sullen, monstrous—something like the Egyptian, not quite so massive but even more formidable in starkness—an architecture symbolizing an age when men were still in the dawn-shadows of Creation and dreamed of monstrous gods.

"Over the inner circle of columns was a curving roof—almost a dome. How they built it, or how they came to anticipate the Roman builders by so many ages, I can't say, for it was a startling departure from the rest of their architectural style, but there it was. And from this domelike roof hung a great round shining thing that caught the starlight in a silver net. I knew then what we had been following for so many mad miles! It was a great gong—the voice of El-il. It looked like jade but I'm not sure to this day. But whatever it was, it was the symbol on which the faith and cult of the Sumerians hung—the symbol of the god-head itself. And I know Naluna was right when she told us that her ancestors brought it with them on that long, gruelling trek, ages ago, when they fled before Sargon's wild riders. And how many

eons before that time must it have hung in El-il's temple in Nippur, Erech or Old Eridu, booming out its mellow threat or promise over the dreamy valley of the Euphrates, or across the green foam of the Persian Gulf!

"They stood us just within the first ring of columns, and out of the shadows somewhere, looking like a shadow from the past himself, came old Sostoras, the priest-king of Eridu. He was clad in a long robe of green, covered with scales like a snake's hide, and it rippled and shimmered with every step he took. On his head he wore a head-piece of waving plumes and in his hand he held a long-shafted golden mallet.

"He tapped the gong lightly and golden waves of sound flowed over us like a wave suffocating us in its exotic sweetness. And then Naluna came. I never knew if she came from behind the columns or up through some trap floor. One instant the space before the gong was bare, the next she was dancing like a moonbeam on a pool. She was clad in some light, shimmery stuff that barely veiled her sinuous body and lithe limbs. And she danced before Sostoras and the Voice of El-il as women of her breed had danced in old Sumer four thousand years ago.

"I can't begin to describe that dance. It made me freeze and tremble and burn inside. I heard Conrad's breath come in gasps and he shivered like a reed in the wind. From somewhere sounded music that was old when Babylon was young, music as elemental as the fire in a tigress's eyes, and as soulless as an African midnight. And Naluna danced. Her dancing was a whirl of fire and wind and passion and all elemental forces. From all basic, primal fundamentals she drew underlying principles and combined them in one pin-wheel of motion. She narrowed the universe to a dagger-point of meaning and her flying feet and shimmering body wove out the mazes of that one central Thought. Her dancing stunned, exalted, maddened and hypnotized.

"As she whirled and spun, she was the elemental Essence, one and a part of all powerful impulses and moving or sleeping powers—the sun, the moon, the stars, the blind groping of hidden roots to light, the fire from the furnace, the sparks from the anvil, the breath of the fawn, the talons of the eagle. Naluna danced and her dancing was Time and Eternity, the urge of Creation and the urge of Death; birth and dissolution in one, age and infancy combined.

"My dazed mind refused to retain more impressions; the girl merged into a whirling flicker of white fire before my dizzy eyes; then Sostoras struck one light note on the Voice and she fell at his feet, a quivering white shadow. The moon was just beginning to glow over the cliffs to the East.

"The warriors seized Conrad and me, and bound me to one of the outer columns. Him they dragged to the inner circle and bound to a column directly in front of the great gong. And I saw Naluna, white in the growing glow, gaze drawnly at him, then shoot a glance full of meaning at me, as she faded from sight among the dark sullen columns.

"Old Sostoras made a motion and from the shadows came a wizened black slave who looked incredibly old. He had the withered features and vacant stare of a deaf-mute, and the priest-king handed the golden mallet to him. Then Sostoras fell back and stood beside me, while Gorat bowed and stepped

back a pace and the warriors likewise bowed and backed still farther away. In fact they seemed most blooming anxious to get as far away from that sinister ring of columns as they could.

"There was a tense moment of waiting. I looked out across the lake at the high, sullen cliffs that girt the valley, at the silent city lying beneath the rising moon. It was like a dead city. The whole scene was most unreal, as if Conrad and I had been transported to another planet or back into a dead and forgotten age. Then the black mute struck the gong.

"At first it was a low, mellow whisper that flowed from under the black man's steady mallet. But it swiftly grew in intensity. The sustained, increasing sound became nerve-racking—it grew unbearable. It was more than mere sound. The mute evoked a quality of vibration that entered into every nerve and racked it apart. It grew louder and louder until I felt that the most desirable thing in the world was complete deafness, to be like that blank-eyed mute who neither heard nor felt the perdition of sound he was creating. And yet I saw sweat beading his ape-like brow. Surely some thunder of that brain-shattering cataclysm re-echoed in his own soul. El-il spoke to us and death was in his voice. Surely, if one of the terrible, black gods of past ages could speak, he would speak in just such tongue! There was neither mercy, pity nor weakness in its roar. It was the assurance of a cannibal god to whom mankind was but a plaything and a puppet to dance on his string.

"Sound can grow too deep, too shrill or too loud for the human ear to record. Not so with the Voice of El-il, which had its creation in some in-human age when dark wizards knew how to rack brain, body and soul apart. Its depth was unbearable, its volume was unbearable, yet ear and soul were keenly alive to its resonance and did not grow mercifully numb and dulled. And its terrible sweetness was beyond human endurance; it suffocated us in a smothering wave of sound that yet was barbed with golden fangs. I gasped and struggled in physical agony. Behind me I was aware that even old Soteras had his hands over his ears, and Gorat groveled on the floor, grinding his face into the bricks.

"And if it so affected me, who was just within the magic circle of columns, and those Sumerians who were outside the circle, what was it doing to Conrad, who was inside the inner ring and beneath that domed roof that intensified every note?

"Till the day he dies Conrad will never be closer to madness and death than he was then. He writhed in his bonds like a snake with a broken back; his face was horribly contorted, his eyes distended, and foam flecked his livid lips. But in that hell of golden, agonizing sound I could hear nothing—I could only see his gaping mouth and his frothy, flaccid lips, open and writhing like an imbecile's. But I sensed he was howling like a dying dog.

"Oh, the sacrificial daggers of the Semites were merciful. Even Moloch's lurid furnace was easier than the death promised by this rending and ripping vibration that armed sound-waves with venomous talons. I felt my own brain was brittle as frozen glass. I knew that a few seconds more of that torture and Conrad's brain would shatter like a crystal goblet and he would die in the black raving of utter madness. And then something snapped me back from



the mazes I'd gotten into. It was the fierce grasp of a small hand on mine, behind the column to which I was bound. I felt a tug at my cords as if a knife edge was being passed along them, and my hands were free. I felt something pressed into my hand and a fierce exultation surged through me. I'd recognize the familiar checkered grip of my Webley .44 in a thousand!

"I acted in a flash that took the whole gang off guard. I lunged away from the column and dropped the black mute with a bullet through his brain, wheeled and shot old Sostoras through the belly. He went down, spewing blood, and I crashed a volley square into the stunned ranks of the soldiers. At that range I couldn't miss. Three of them dropped and the rest woke up and scattered like a flock of birds. In a second the place was empty except for Conrad, Naluna and me, and the men on the floor. It was like a dream, the echoes from the shots still crashing, and the acrid scent of powder and blood knocking the air.

"The girl cut Conrad loose and he fell on the floor and yammered like a dying imbecile. I shook him but he had a wild glare in his eyes and was frothing like a mad dog, so I dragged him up, shoved an arm under him and started for the stairs. We weren't out of the mess yet, by a long shot. Down those wide, winding, dark galleries we went expecting any minute to be ambushed but the chaps must have still been in a bad funk, because we got out of that hellish temple without any interference. Outside the iron portals Conrad collapsed and I tried to talk to him, but he could neither hear nor speak. I turned to Naluna.

"Can you do anything for him?"

"Her eyes flashed in the moonlight. 'I have not defied my people and my god and betrayed my cult and my race for naught! I stole the weapon of smoke and flame, and freed you, did I not? I love him and I will not lose him now!'

"She darted into the temple and was out almost instantly with a jug of wine. She claimed it had magical powers. I don't believe it. I think Conrad simply was suffering from a sort of shell-shock from close proximity to that fearful noise and that lake water would have done as well as the wine. But Naluna poured some wine between his lips and emptied some over his head, and soon he groaned and cursed.

"See" she cried triumphantly, 'the magic wine has lifted the spell El-til put on him!' And she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him vigorously.

"My God, Bill," he groaned, sitting up and holding his head, 'what kind of a nightmare is this?'

"Can you walk, old chap?" I asked, 'I think we've stirred up a bloomin' hornet's nest and we'd best leg it out of here.'

"I'll try." He staggered up, Naluna helping him. I heard a sinister rustle and whispering in the black mouth of the temple and I judged the warriors and priests inside were working up their nerve to rush us. We made it down the steps in a great hurry to where lay the boat that had brought us to the island. Not even the black rowers were there. An ax and shield lay in it and

I seized the ax and knocked holes in the bottoms of the other boats which were tied near it.

"Meanwhile the big gong had begun to boom out again and Conrad groaned and writhed as every intonation rasped his raw nerves. It was a warning note this time and I saw lights flare up in the city and heard a sudden hum of shouts float out across the lake. Something hissed softly by my head and slashed into the water. A quick look showed me Gorat standing in the door of the temple bending his heavy bow. I leaped in, Naluna helped Conrad in, and we shoved off in a hurry to the accompaniment of several more shafts from the charming Gorat, one of which took a lock of hair from Naluna's pretty head.

"I laid to the oars while Naluna steered and Conrad lay on the bottom of the boat and was violently sick. We saw a fleet of boats put out from the city, and as they saw us by the gleam of the moon, a yell of concentrated rage went up that froze the blood in my veins. We were heading for the opposite end of the lake and had a long start on them, but in this way we were forced to round the island and we'd scarcely left it astern when out of some nook leaped a long boat with six warriors—I saw Gorat in the bows with that confounded bow of his.

"I had no spare cartridges so I laid to it with all my might, and Conrad, somewhat green in the face, took the shield and rigged it up in the stern, which was the saving of us, because Gorat hung within howshot of us all the way across the lake and he filled that shield so full of arrows it resembled a blooming porcupine. You'd have thought they'd had plenty after the slaughter I made among them on the roof, but they were after us like hounds after a hare.

"We'd a fair start on them but Gorat's five rowers shot his boat through the water like a racehorse, and when we grounded on the shore, they weren't half a dozen jumps behind us. As we scrambled out I saw it was either make a fight of it there and be cut down from the front, or else be shot like rabbits as we ran. I called to Naluna to run but she laughed and drew a dagger—she was a man's woman, that girl!

"Gorat and his merry men came surging up to the landing with a clamor of yells and a swirl of oars—they swarmed over the side like a gang of bloody pirates and the battle was on! Luck was with Gorat at the first pass, for I missed him and killed the man behind him. The hammer snapped on an empty shell and I dropped the Webley and snatched up the ax just as they closed with us. By Jove! It stirs my blood now to think of the touch-and-go fury of that fight! Knee-deep in water we met them, hand to hand, chest to chest!

"Conrad hained one with a stone he picked from the water, and out of the tail of my eye, as I swung for Gorat's head, I saw Naluna spring like a che panther on another, and they went down together in a swirl of limbs and a flash of steel. Gorat's sword was thrusting for my life, but I knocked it aside with the ax and he lost his footing and went down—for the lake bottom was solid stone there, and treacherous as sin.

"One of the warriors lunged in with a spear, but he tripped over the fellow

Conrad had killed, his helmet went off and I crushed his skull before he could recover his balance. Gorat was up and coming for me, and the other was swinging his sword in both hands for a death blow, but he never struck, for Conrad caught up the spear that had been dropped, and spited him from behind, neat as a whistle.

"Gorat's point raked my ribs as he thrust for my heart and I twisted to one side, and his up flung arm broke like a rotten stick beneath my stroke but saved his life. He was game—they were all game or they'd never have rushed my gun. He sprang in like a blood-mad tiger, hawking for my head. I ducked and avoided the full force of the blow but couldn't get away from it altogether and it laid my scalp open in a three-inch gash, clear to the bone—here's the scar to prove it. Blood blinded me and I struck back like a wounded lion, blind and terrible, and by sheer chance I landed squarely. I felt the as crunch through metal and bone, the haft splintered in my hand, and there was Gorat dead at my feet in a horrid welter of blood and brains.

"I shook the blood out of my eyes and looked about for my companions. Conrad was helping Naluna up and it seemed to me she swayed a little. There was blood on her bosom but it might have come from the red dagger she gripped in a hand maimed to the wrist. God! it *was* a bit sickening, to think of it now. The water we stood in was choked with corpses and ghastly red. Naluna pointed out across the lake and we saw Erdu's boats sweeping down on us—a good way off as yet, but coming swiftly. She led us at a run away from the lake's edge. My wound was bleeding as only a scalp wound can bleed, but I wasn't weakened as yet. I shook the blood out of my eyes, saw Naluna stagger as she ran and tried to put my arm about her to steady her, but she shook me off.

"She was making for the cliffs and we reached them out of breath. Naluna leaned against Conrad and pointed upward with a shaky hand, breathing in great, sobbing gasps. I caught her meaning. A rope ladder led upward. I made her go first with Conrad following. I came after him, drawing the ladder up behind me. We'd gotten some half way up when the boats landed and the warriors raced up the shore, loosing their arrows as they ran. But we were in the shadow of the cliffs, which made aim uncertain, and most of the shafts fell short or broke on the face of the cliff. One stuck in my left arm, but I shook it out and didn't stop to congratulate the marksman on his eye.

"Once over the cliff's edge, I jerked the ladder up and tore it loose, and then turned to see Naluna sway and collapse in Conrad's arms. We laid her gently on the grass, but a man with half an eye could tell she was going fast. I wiped the blood from her bosom and stared aghast. Only a woman with a great love could have made that run and that clash with such a wound as that girl had under her heart.

"Conrad cradled her head in his lap and tried to utter a few words, but she weakly put her arms around his neck and drew his face down to hers.

"'Weep not for me, my lover,' she said, as her voice weakened to a whisper. 'Thou hast been mine a long time, as thou shalt be again. In the mud huts of the Old River, before Sumer was, when we tended the flocks, we were as one. In the palaces of Old Erdu, before the barbarians came out of the East, we

loved each other. Aye, on this very lake have we floated in past ages, living and loving, thou and I. So weep not, my lover, for what is one little life when we have known so many and shall know so many more? And in each of them, thou art mine, and I am thine.

"But thou must not linger. Hark! They clamor for thy blood below. But since the ladder is destroyed there is but one other way by which they may come upon the cliffs—the place by which they brought thee into the valley. Haste! They will return across the lake, scale the cliffs there and pursue thee, but thou may'st escape them if thou be'st swift. And when thou hearest the Voice of El-lil, remember, living or dead, Naluna loves thee with a greater love than any god.

"'But one boon I beg of thee,' she whispered, her heavy lids drooping like a sleepy child's. 'Press, I beg thee, thy lips on mine, my master, before the shadows utterly enfold me; then leave me here and go, and weep not, oh my lover, for what is—one—little—life—to—us—who—have—loved—in—so—many—'

"Conrad wept like a blithering baby and so did I, by Judas, and I'll stamp the lousy brains out of the jackass who twists me for it! We left her with her arms folded on her bosom and a smile on her lovely face, and if there's a heaven for Christian folk, she's there with the best of them, on my oath.

"Well, we reeled away in the moonlight and my wounds were still bleeding and I was about done in. All that kept me going was a sort of wild beast instinct to live, I fancy, for if I was ever near to lying down and dying, it was then. We'd gone perhaps a mile when the Sumerians played their last ace. I think they'd realized we'd slipped out of their grasp and had too much start to be caught.

"At any rate, all at once that damnable gong began booming. I felt like howling like a dog with rabies. This time it was a different sound. I never saw or heard a gong before or since whose notes could convey so many different meanings. This was an insidious call—a furing urge, yet a peremptory command for us to return. It threatened and promised; it its attraction had been great before we stood on that Babel tower and felt its full power, now it was almost irresistible. It was hypnotic. I know now how a bird feels when charmed by a snake and how the snake himself feels when the fakers play on their pipes. I can't begin to make you understand the overpowering magnetism of that call. It made you want to writhe and tear at the air and run back, blind and screaming, as a hare runs into a python's jaw. I had to fight it as a man fights for his soul.

"As for Conrad, it had him in its grip. He halted and rocked like a drunken man.

"'It's no use,' he mumbled thickly. 'It drags at my heartstrings; it's fettered my brain and my soul; it embraces all the evil lure of all the universes. I must go back.'

"And he started staggering back the way we had come—toward that golden he floating to us over the jungle. But I thought of the girl Naluna that had given up her life to save us from that abomination, and a strange fury gripped me.

"See here!" I shouted. "This won't do, you bloody fool! You're off your bally bean! I won't have it, d'you hear?"

"But he paid no heed, shoving by me with eyes like a man in a trance, so I let him have it—an honest right hook to the jaw that stretched him out dead to the world. I slung him over my shoulder and reeled on my way, and it was nearly an hour before he came to, quite sane and grateful to me.

"Well, we saw no more of the people of Eridu. Whether they trailed us at all or not, I haven't any idea. We would have fled no faster than we did, for we were fleeing the haunting, horrible mellow whisper that dogged us from the south. We finally made it back to the spot where we'd cached our dunnage, and then, armed and scantily equipped, we started the long trek for the coast. Maybe you read or heard something about two emaciated wanderers being picked up by an elephant-hunting expedition in the Somaliland back country, dazed and incoherent from suffering. Well, we were about done for, I'll admit, but we were perfectly sane. The incoherent part was when we tried to tell our tale and the blasted idiots wouldn't believe it. They patted our backs and talked in soothing tones and poured whiskey-and-sodas down us. We soon shut up, seeing we'd only be branded as liars or lunatics. They got us back to Jibuti, and both of us had had enough of Africa for a spell. I took ship for India and Conrad went the other way—couldn't get back to New England quick enough, where I hope he married that little American girl and is living happily. A wonderful chap, for all his damnable bugs.

"As for me, I can't hear any sort of a gong today without starting. On that long, gruelling trek I never breathed easily until we were beyond the sound of that ghastly Voice. You can't tell what a thing like that may do to your mind. It plays the very deuce with all rational ideas.

"I still hear that hellish gong in my dreams, sometimes, and see that silent, hideously ancient Tower of Babel city in that nightmare valley. Sometimes I wonder if it's still calling to me across the years. But that's nonsense. Anyway, there's the yarn as it stands and if you don't believe me, I won't blame you at all."

But I prefer to believe Bill Kirby, for I know his breed from Hengist down, and know him to be like all the rest—truthful, aggressive, profane, restless, sentimental and straightforward, a true brother of the roving, fighting, adventuring Sons of Man.

# Ylla

by Ray Bradbury

*Ray Bradbury's rise to national standing as a short story writer has been capped by the recent publication of his first novel, "The Martian Chronicles." The fan-reader of this book, which deals with the advent of Earth fiends on Mars and the subsequent rise and fall of the Terrestrial colony there, will recognize some of the novel's chapters as having originally appeared as short stories in various magazines including such varied titles as Collier's, Charm, and Planet Stories. But the story we now reprint, written originally for the book and dealing with the psychic impact of the first Terrestrial mentality on the curiously sensitive Martians, has never appeared in a mass medium before. It is truly an unusual presentation of an alien civilization, vibrant with color and sympathy.*

THEY HAD a house of crystal pillars on the planet Mars by the edge of an empty sea, and every morning you could see Mrs. K eating the golden fruits that grew from the crystal walls, or cleaning the house with handfuls of magnetic dust which, taking all dirt with it, blew away on the hot wind. Afternoons, when the fossil sea was warm and motionless, and the wine trees stood stiff in the yard, and the little distant Martian bone town was all enclosed, and no one drifted out their doors, you could see Mr. K himself in his room, reading from a metal book with raised hieroglyphs over which his fingers stroked, a voice sang, a soft, ancient voice, which told tales of when the sea was red steam on the shore and ancient men had carried clouds of metal insects and electric spiders into battle.

Mr. and Mrs. K had lived by the dead sea for twenty years, and their ancestors had lived in the same house, which turned and followed the sun, flower like, for ten centuries.

Mr. and Mrs. K were not old. They had the fair, brownish skin of the true Martian, the yellow coin eyes, the soft musical voices. Once they had liked painting pictures with chemical fire, swimming in the canals in the seasons when the wine trees filled them with green liquors, and talking into the dawn together by the blue phosphorous portraits in the speaking room.

They were not happy now.

This morning Mrs. K stood between the pillars, listening to the desert sands beat, melt into yellow wax, and seemingly run on the horizon.

Something was going to happen.

She waited.

She watched the blue sky of Mars as if it might at any moment grip in on itself, contract, and expel a shining miracle down upon the sand.

Nothing happened.

Tired of waiting, she walked through the misting pillars. A gentle rain sprang from the fluted pillar tops, cooling the scorched air, falling gently on her. On hot days it was like walking in a creek. The floors of the house glittered with cool streams. In the distance she heard her husband playing his book steadily, his fingers never tired of the old songs. Quietly she wished he might one day again spend as much time holding and touching her like a little harp as he did his incredible books.

But no. She shook her head, an imperceptible, forgiving shrug. Her eyelids closed softly down upon her golden eyes. Marriage made people old and familiar, while still young.

She lay back in a chair that moved to take her shape even as she moved. She closed her eyes tightly and nervously.

The dream occurred.

Her brown fingers trembled, came up, grasped at the air. A moment later she sat up, startled, gasping.

She glanced about swiftly, as if expecting someone there before her. She seemed disappointed; the space between the pillars was empty.

Her husband appeared in a triangular door. "Did you call?" he asked irritably.

"No!" she cried.

"I thought I heard you cry out."

"Did I? I was almost asleep and had a dream!"

"In the daytime? You don't often do that."

She sat as if struck in the face by the dream. "How strange, how very strange," she murmured. "The dream."

"Oh?" He evidently wished to return to his book.

"I dreamed about a man."

"A man?"

"A tall man, six feet one inch tall."

"How absurd; a giant, a misshapen giant."

"Somehow"—she tried the words—"he looked all right. In spite of being tall. And he had—oh, I know you'll think it silly—he had *blue* eyes!"

"Blue eyes! Gods!" cried Mr. K. "What'll you dream next? I suppose he had *black* hair?"

"How did you *guess*?" She was excited.

"I picked the most unlikely color," he replied coldly.

"Well, black it was!" she cried. "And he had a very white skin; oh, he was *most* unusual! He was dressed in a strange uniform and he came down out of the sky and spoke pleasantly to me." She smiled.

"Out of the sky; what nonsense!"

"He came in a metal thing that glittered in the sun," she remembered. She closed her eyes to shape it again. "I dreamed there was the sky and some-

thing sparkled like a coin thrown into the air, and suddenly it grew large and fell down softly to land, a long silver craft, round and alien. And a door opened in the side of the silver object and this tall man stepped out."

"If you worked harder you wouldn't have these silly dreams."

"I rather enjoyed it," she replied, lying back. "I never suspected myself of such an imagination. Black hair, blue eyes, and white skin. What a strange man, and yet—quite handsome."

"Wishful thinking."

"You're unkind. I didn't think him up on purpose; he just came in my mind while I drowsed. It wasn't like a dream. It was so unexpected and different. He looked at me and he said, 'I've come from the third planet in my ship. My name is Nathaniel York——'"

"A stupid name; it's no name at all," objected the husband.

"Of course it's stupid, because it's a dream," she explained softly. "And he said, 'This is the first trip across space. There are only two of us in our ship, myself and my friend Bert.'"

"Another stupid name."

"And he said, 'We're from a city on *Earth*; that's the name of our planet,' " continued Mrs. K. "That's what he said. 'Earth' was the name he spoke. And he used another language. Somehow I understood him. With my mind. Telepathy, I suppose."

Mr. K turned away. She stopped him with a word. "Yll?" she called quietly. "Do you ever wonder if—well, if there are people living on the third planet?"

"The third planet is incapable of supporting life," stated the husband patiently. "Our scientists have said there's far too much oxygen in their atmosphere."

"But wouldn't it be fascinating if there *were* people? And they traveled through space in some sort of ship?"

"Really, Ylla, you know how I hate this emotional wailing. Let's get on with our work."

It was late in the day when she began singing the song as she moved among the whispering pillars of rain. She sang it over and over again.

"What's that song?" snapped her husband at last, walking in to sit at the fire table.

"I don't know." She looked up, surprised at herself. She put her hand to her mouth, unbelieving. The sun was setting. The house was closing itself in, like a giant flower, with the passing of light. A wind blew among the pillars; the fire table bubbled its fierce pool of silver lava. The wind stirred her russet hair, crooning softly in her ears. She stood silently looking out into the great fallow distances of sea bottom, as if recalling something, her yellow eyes soft and moist. "Drink to me only with thine eyes, and I will pledge with mine," she sang, softly, quietly, slowly. "Or leave a kiss within the cup, and I'll not ask for wine." She hummed now, moving her hands in the wind ever so lightly, her eyes shut. She finished the song.

It was very beautiful.



"Never heard that song before. Did you compose it?" he inquired, his eyes sharp.

"No. Yes. No, I don't know, really!" She hesitated wildly. "I don't even know what the words are; they're another language!"

"What language?"

She dropped portions of meat numbly into the simmering lava. "I don't know." She drew the meat forth a moment later, cooked, served on a plate for him. "It's just a crazy thing I made up, I guess. I don't know why."

He said nothing. He watched her drown meats in the hissing fire pool. The sun was gone. Slowly, slowly the night came in to fill the room, swallowing the pillars and both of them, like a dark wine poured to the ceiling. Only the silver lava's glow lit their faces.

She hummed the strange song again.

Instantly he leaped from his chair and stalked angrily from the room.

Later, in isolation, he finished supper.

When he arose he stretched, glanced at her, and suggested, yawning, "Let's take the flame birds to town tonight to see an entertainment."

"You don't *mean* it?" she said. "Are you feeling well?"

"What's so strange about that?"

"But we haven't gone for an entertainment in six months!"

"I think it's a good idea."

"Suddenly you're so solicitous," she said.

"Don't talk that way," he replied peevishly. "Do you or do you not want to go?"

She looked out at the pale desert. The twin white moons were rising. Cool water ran softly about her toes. She began to tremble just the least bit. She wanted very much to sit quietly here, soundless, not moving until this thing occurred, this thing expected all day, this thing that could not occur but might. A drift of song brushed through her mind.

"I—"

"Do you good," he urged. "Come along now."

"I'm tired," she said. "Some other night."

"Here's your scarf." He handed her a phial. "We haven't gone anywhere in months."

"Except you, twice a week to Xi City." She wouldn't look at him.

"Business," he said.

"Oh?" She whispered to herself.

From the phial a liquid poured, turned to blue mist, settled about her neck, quivering.

The flame birds waited, like a bed of coals, glowing on the cool smooth sands. The white canopy ballooned on the night wind, flapping softly, tied by a thousand green ribbons to the birds.

Ylla laid herself back in the canopy and, at a word from her husband, the birds leaped, burning, toward the dark sky. The ribbons tautened, the canopy lifted. The sand slid whining under; the blue hills drifted by, drifted by,

leaving their home behind, the raining pillars, the caged flowers, the singing books, the whispering floor creeks. She did not look at her husband. She heard him crying out to the birds as they rose higher, like ten thousand hot sparkles, so many red-yellow fireworks in the heavens, tugging the canopy like a flower petal, burning through the wind.

She didn't watch the dead, ancient bone-chess cities slide under, or the old canals filled with emptiness and dreams. Past dry rivers and dry lakes they flew, like a shadow of the moon, like a torch burning.

She watched only the sky.

The husband spoke.

She watched the sky.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"What?"

He exhaled. "You might pay attention."

"I was thinking."

"I never thought you were a nature lover, but you're certainly interested in the sky tonight," he said.

"It's very beautiful."

"I was figuring," said the husband slowly. "I thought I'd call Huile tonight. I'd like to talk to him about us spending some time, oh, only a week or so, in the Blue Mountains. It's just an idea——"

"The Blue Mountains!" She held to the canopy rim with one hand, turning swiftly toward him.

"Oh, it's just a suggestion."

"When do you want to go?" she asked, trembling.

"I thought we might leave tomorrow morning. You know, an early start and all that," he said very casually.

"But we never go this early in the year!"

"Just this once, I thought——" He smiled. "Do us good to get away. Some peace and quiet. You know. You haven't anything *else* planned? We'll go, won't we?"

She took a breath, waited, and then replied, "No."

"What?" His cry startled the birds. The canopy jerked.

"No," she said firmly. "It's settled. I won't go."

He looked at her. They did not speak after that. She turned away.

The birds flew on, ten thousand firebrands down the wind.

In the dawn the sun, through the crystal pillars, melted the fog that supported Ylla as she slept. All night she had hung above the floor, buoyed by the soft carpeting of mist that poured from the walls when she lay down to rest. All night she had slept on this silent river, like a boat upon a soundless tide. Now the fog burned away, the mist level lowered until she was deposited upon the shore of waking.

She opened her eyes.

Her husband stood over her. He looked as if he had stood there for hours, watching. She did not know why, but she could not look him in the face.

"You've been dreaming again!" he said. "You spoke out and kept me awake. I really think you should see a doctor."

"I'll be all right."

"You talked a lot in your sleep?"

"Did I?" She started up.

Dawn was cold in the room. A gray light filled her as she lay there.

"What was your dream?"

She had to think a moment to remember. "The ship. It came from the sky again, landed, and the tall man stepped out and talked with me, telling me little jokes, laughing, and it was pleasant."

Mr. K touched a pillar. Fountains of warm water leaped up, steaming; the chill vanished from the room. Mr. K's face was impassive.

"And then," she said, "this man, who said his strange name was Nathaniel York, told me I was beautiful and—and kissed me."

"Ha!" cried the husband, turning violently away, his jaw working.

"It's only a dream." She was amused.

"Keep your silly, feminine dreams to yourself!"

"You're acting like a child." She lapsed back upon the few remaining remnants of chemical mist. After a moment she laughed softly. "I thought of some more of the dream," she confessed.

"Well, what is it, what *is* it?" he shouted.

"Yll, you're so bad-tempered."

"Tell me!" he demanded. "You can't keep secrets from me!" His face was dark and rigid as he stood over her.

"I've never seen you this way," she replied, half shocked, half entertained. "All that happened was this Nathaniel York person told me—well, he told me that he'd take me away into his ship, into the sky with him, and take me back to his planet with him. It's really quite ridiculous."

"Ridiculous, *is* it?" he almost screamed. "You should have heard yourself, fawning on him, talking to him, singing with him, oh gods, all night; you should have *heard* yourself!"

"Yll!"

"When's he landing? Where's he coming down with his damned ship?"

"Yll, lower your voice."

"Voice be damned!" He bent stiffly over her. "And *in* this dream"—he seized her wrist—"didn't the ship land over in Green Valley, *didn't* it? Answer me!"

"Why, yes——"

"And it landed this afternoon, didn't it?" he kept at her.

"Yes, yes, I think so, yes, but only in a dream!"

"Well"—he flung her hand away stiffly—"it's good you're truthful! I heard every word you said in your sleep. You mentioned the valley and the time." Breathing hard, he walked between the pillars like a man blinded by a lightning bolt. Slowly his breath returned. She watched him as if he were quite insane. She arose finally and went to him. "Yll," she whispered,

"I'm all right."

"You're sick."

"No." He forced a tired smile. "Just childish. Forgive me, darling." He gave her a rough pat. "Too much work lately. I'm sorry. I think I'll be down awhile——"

"You were so excited."

"I'm all right now. Fine." He exhaled. "Let's forget it. Say, I heard a joke about Uel yesterday, I meant to tell you. What do you say you fix breakfast, I'll tell the joke, and let's not talk about all this."

"It was only a dream."

"Of course." He kissed her cheek mechanically. "Only a dream."

At noon the sun was high and hot and the hills shimmered in the light.

"Aren't you going to town?" asked Ylla.

"Town?" He raised his brows faintly.

"This is the day you *always* go." She adjusted a flower cage on its pedestal. The flowers stirred, opening their hungry yellow mouths.

He closed his book. "No. It's too hot, and it's late."

"Oh." She finished her task and moved toward the door. "Well, I'll be back soon."

"Wait a minute! Where are you going?"

She was in the door swiftly. "Over to Pao's. She invited me!"

"Today?"

"I haven't seen her in a long time. It's only a little way."

"Over in Green Valley, isn't it?"

"Yes, just a walk, not far, I thought I'd——" She hurried.

"I'm sorry, really sorry," he said, running to fetch her back, looking very concerned about his forgetfulness. "It slipped my mind. I invited Dr. Nlle out this afternoon."

"Dr. Nlle!" She edged toward the door.

He caught her elbow and drew her steadily in. "Yes."

"But Pao——"

"Pao can wait, Ylla. We must entertain Nlle."

"Just for a few minutes——"

"No, Ylla."

"No?"

He shook his head. "No. Besides, it's a terribly long walk to Pao's. All the way over through Green Valley and then past the big canal and down, isn't it? And it'll be very, very hot, and Dr. Nlle would be delighted to see you. Well?"

She did not answer. She wanted to break and run. She wanted to cry out. But she only sat in the chair, turning her fingers over slowly, staring at them expressionlessly, trapped.

"Ylla?" he murmured. "You *will* be here, won't you?"

"Yes," she said after a long time. "I'll be here."

"All afternoon?"

Her voice was dull. "All afternoon."

Late in the day Dr. Nlle had not put in an appearance. Ylla's husband did

not seem overly surprised. When it was quite late he murmured something, went to a closet, and drew forth an evil weapon, a long yellowish tube ending in a bellows and a trigger. He turned, and upon his face was a mask, hammered from silver metal, expressionless, the mask that he always wore when he wished to hide his feelings, the mask which curved and hollowed so exquisitely to his thin cheeks and chin and brow. The mask glinted, and he held the evil weapon in his hand, considering it. It hummed constantly, an insect hum. From it hordes of golden bees could be flung out with a high shriek. Golden, horrid bees that stung, poisoned, and fell lifeless, like seeds on the sand.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"What?" He listened to the bellows, to the evil hum. "If Dr. Nile is late, I'll be damned if I'll wait. I'm going out to hunt a bit. I'll be back. You be sure to stay right here now, won't you?" The silver mask glimmered.

"Yes."

"And tell Dr. Nile I'll return. Just hunting."

The triangular door closed. His footsteps faded down the hill.

She watched him walking through the sunlight until he was gone. Then she resumed her tasks with the magnetic dusts and the new fruits to be plucked from the crystal walls. She worked with energy and dispatch, but on occasion a numbness took hold of her and she caught herself singing that odd and memorable song and looking out beyond the crystal pillars at the sky.

She held her breath and stood very still, waiting.

It was coming nearer.

At any moment it might happen.

It was like those days when you heard a thunderstorm coming and there was the waiting silence and then the faintest pressure of the atmosphere as the climate blew over the land in shifts and shadows and vapors. And the change pressed at your ears and you were suspended in the waiting time of the coming storm. You began to tremble. The sky was stained and coloured; the clouds were thickened; the mountains took on an iron taint. The caged flowers blew with faint sighs of warning. You felt your hair stir softly. Somewhere in the house the voice-clock sang. "Time, time, time, time . . ." ever so gently, no more than water tapping on velvet.

And then the storm. The electric illumination, the engulfments of dark wash and sounding black fell down, shutting in, forever.

That's how it was now. A storm gathered, yet the sky was clear. Lightning was expected, yet there was no cloud.

Ylla moved through the breathless summer house. Lightning would strike from the sky any instant; there would be a thunderclap, a bill of smoke, a silence, footsteps on the path, a rap on the crystalline door, and her running to answer. . . .

Crazy Ylla! she scoffed. Why think these wild things with your idle mind? And then it happened.

There was a warmth as of a great fire passing in the air. A whirling, rushing sound. A gleam in the sky, of metal.

Ylla cried out.

Running through the pillars, she flung wide a door. She faced the hills. But by this time there was nothing.

She was about to race down the hill when she stopped herself. She was supposed to stay here, go nowhere. The doctor was coming to visit, and her husband would be angry if she ran off.

She waited in the door, breathing rapidly, her hand out.

She strained to see over toward Green Valley, but saw nothing.

Silly woman. She went inside. You and your imagination, she thought. That was nothing but a bird, a leaf, the wind, or a fish in the canal. Sit down. Rest.

She sat down.

A shot sounded.

Very clearly, sharply, the sound of the evil insect weapon.

Her body jerked with it.

It came from a long way off. One shot. The swift humming distant bees. One shot. And then a second shot, precise and cold, and far away.

Her body winced again and for some reason she started up, screaming, and screaming, and never wanting to stop screaming. She ran violently through the house and once more threw wide the door.

The echoes were dying away, away.

Gone.

She waited in the yard, her face pale, for five minutes.

Finally, with slow steps, her head down, she wandered about the pillared rooms, laying her hand to things, her lips quivering, until finally she sat alone in the darkening wine room, waiting. She began to wipe an amber glass with the hem of her scarf.

And then, from far off, the sound of footsteps crunching on the thin, small rocks.

She rose up to stand in the center of the quiet room. The glass fell from her fingers, smashing to bits.

The footsteps hesitated outside the door.

Should she speak? Should she cry out, "Come in, oh, come in"?

She went forward a few paces.

The footsteps walked up the ramp. A hand twisted the door latch.

She smiled at the door.

The door opened. She stopped smiling.

It was her husband. His silver mask glowed dully.

He entered the room and looked at her for only a moment. Then he snapped the weapon bellows open, cracked out two dead bees, heard them spat on the floor as they fell, stepped on them, and placed the empty bellows gun in the corner of the room as Ylla bent down and tried, over and over, with no success, to pick up the pieces of the shattered glass. "What were you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said with his back turned. He removed the mask.

"But the gun—I heard you fire it. Twice."

"Just hunting. Once in a while you like to hunt. Did Dr. Nile arrive?"

"No."

"Wait a minute." He snapped his fingers disgustedly. "Why, I remember now. He was supposed to visit us *tomorrow* afternoon. How stupid of me."

They sat down to eat. She looked at her food and did not move her hands. "What's wrong?" he asked, not looking up from dipping his meat in the bubbling lava.

"I don't know. I'm not hungry," she said.

"Why not?"

"I don't know; I'm just not."

The wind was rising across the sky; the sun was going down. The room was small and suddenly cold.

"I've been trying to remember," she said in the silent room, across from her cold, erect, golden-eyed husband.

"Remember what?" He sipped his wine.

"That song. That fine and beautiful song." She closed her eyes and hummed, but it was not the song. "I've forgotten it. And, somehow, I don't want to forget it. It's something I want always to remember." She moved her hands as if the rhytan might help her to remember all of it. Then she lay back in her chair. "I can't remember." She began to cry.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"I don't know, I don't know, but I can't help it. I'm sad and I don't know why, I cry and I don't know why, but I'm crying."

Her head was in her hands; her shoulders moved again and again.

"You'll be all right tomorrow," he said.

She did not look up at him; she looked only at the empty desert and the very bright stars coming out now on the black sky, and far away there was a sound of wind rising and canal waters stirring cold in the long canals. She shut her eyes, trembling.

"Yes," she said. "I'll be all right tomorrow."

# 'The Three Eyed Man

by Ray Cummings

*Ray Cummings, one of the pioneers of modern science-fiction, made his first hits with two series of stories: tales of "The Scientific Club" whose best-known productions were the novels of the Golden Atom, and stories of the scientific adventures of a plump young man named Tubby. The "Tubby" stories were quite excellent little lessons in basic science, told with a sugar-coating that endeared them to early readers. "The Three Eyed Man" is a Tubby story dealing with the mysteries of sight and dimensional perception—and manages to bring in a tantalizing glimpse of the Fourth Dimension as well.*

TUBBY raised himself up in the neat little hospital cot. The bandage covered his left eye completely, but his right one was unimpaired, and with it he stared at his friend aggressively. "That ain't so," he declared. "That ain't so nohow."

"I ain't sayin' it is—I'm tellin' you what *he* said. With one eye you can only see things in two dimensions. That's what he said."

"You're right, Jake," agreed the second man. "That's what he said."

Tubby relaxed hopelessly. "Well, it ain't so. Bunk. Abso-lute-ly bunk!"

The first man was unabashed. "Well, that's what *he* said. A one eyed man sees everything flat. Length an' breadth, but no thickness. A world of only two dimensions." He rolled this statement off his tongue impressively.

"Bunk!" muttered Tubby. Then abruptly he sat up again—so abruptly that a red hot pain darted through his injured eye under the bandage and made his head swim. His twisted ankle and his shoulder also hurt him badly, but he ignored them all.

"Ain't I got only one eye now?" he demanded.

The first man nodded reluctantly.

Tubby persisted: "An' if you put your hand over your left eye, then ain't you a one eyed man?"

The second man essayed this experiment. "He's right, Jake. That makes us one eyed."

"What you gettin' at?" the first man demanded.

Tubby's single eye glared with anticipatory triumph. "Keep that left eye covered." His two friends followed the command. "Now listen here. You see that table?"

Even with only one eye working, the thing was perfectly visible.



Tubby's two friends nodded.

"How long is that table, Jake?"

"'Bout four feet," the first man estimated promptly.

"An' how wide?"

"'Bout three feet."

"An' how high?"

"'Bout three—maybe three an' a half."

"Take a look with two eyes, Jake. How big does it look now?"

Quite evidently the first man saw no remarkable change. He shrugged.

"I ain't sayin' it's exactly that big," he stated cautiously, obviously fearing trap. "What you gettin' at?"

Tubby's fat little forefinger shot out suddenly, pointing accusingly directly at his friend's face.

"You was only lookin' with one eye, but you give me *three* dimensions! Ain't that proof what you said was bunk? Ain't it, or is it? That's all I ask."

He leaned back on his pillows, exhausted but victorious.

"He's right, Jake," agreed the second man. "You give three dimensions. It must be bunk."

A white-robed nurse glided noiselessly into the room.

"Are you ready, Mr. McGuire?"

Tubby sat up with alarm. "Yeh, I guess so. Where'm I goin'?"

A dapper little internist was pulling forward an invalid's wheel chair.

"The operation takes place up-stairs—in the operating room," said the nurse sweetly. "Dr. Blake, will you take him up? They're ready for him now." She left the room.

Tubby, thoroughly frightened, was bundled into the wheel chair with a blanket wrapped about him. The chair started to roll away.

"Come on, Jake," he said weakly. "Come on, Pete. Stick around—we're goin' upstairs."

The young doctor laughed; and in the hall outside he waved Tubby's friends away.

"You can see him back in the ward in about an hour. It's not a serious operation. We've only kept him in bed because of his other injuries. You wait downstairs—I'll send for you."

An elevator door opened smoothly.

"But them's my pals," Tubby protested faintly. There was a little bump as his chair rolled into the elevator—a bump like a coffin hitting the bottom of a grave. "Listen here, doctor—them's my pals—"

The elevator door slid closed. It was all inexorable—as death. The elevator shot noiselessly upward.

"S'long, Tubby." The first man's voice floated faintly upward from far below. "S'long, Tubby. You ain't goin' to die. See you later."

## II.

The little cone over Tubby's face was horribly sinister. They told him to draw a deep breath, and he did. He had decided now that this operation was

all bunk. He'd tell them so in a minute. He guessed he wouldn't bother about having the operation to-day anyway. Some other time—to-morrow, maybe.

He drew a second breath. Somebody had an arm across his knees. He kicked tentatively, and the arm tightened. His head was ringing. Funny how loud it was getting! Was the ringing in his head? It sounded more like a great, clanging gong away off in the distance and coming nearer and ringing clearer.

There were fingers on his wrists. He tried to raise his arm, but somebody was holding him too tightly. The operation would be starting soon. No, it wouldn't. To-morrow, not to-day. It was all bunk anyway. The doctor had said he'd lose his eye without an operation. What difference? One eye—or two eyes—or three eyes.

With a great effort Tubby squirmed loose from the restraining clutches on his arms and legs and sat bolt upright on the operating table.

"I ain't goin' to have no operation," he said vehemently.

The hands that had been holding him dropped away. His head was ringing tearfully, but not so loud as a moment before. The bandage over his left eye was still there. He jerked it off and opened both his eyes upon a most astounding tableau.

The surgeon and his assistant were cowering over against the wall. Facing them threateningly was a very tall, very thin man. He had on a black frock coat and under one arm a somewhat battered plug hat was jammed. The other arm was outstretched, a finger pointing angrily at the trembling surgeon.

"You let him alone," commanded the stranger. His voice was deep, as though it came up from the depths of his insides. "You can't operate on *him*. He's a friend of mine."

The surgeon and his assistant were edging toward the door. The stranger waved his hand scornfully; and like frightened rabbits they slid through the doorway and down the hall. Tubby could hear their footsteps dying away in the distance.

"Much obliged," he said to the stranger. His head felt better now, and he could see out of both eyes quite as well as before the accident. He turned to his new friend. The stranger's face was very kindly, now that the anger had gone from it. But nevertheless it was the most extraordinary face Tubby had ever seen—so extraordinary, in fact, that Tubby nearly fell off the operating table in surprise as he regarded it.

The face was very thin and wrinkled, with a sharp beaklike nose turning down, and a very long, sharp chin turning up. But the most extraordinary part was that the man had three eyes—two where human eyes belonged, and another directly in the middle, over the nose. The two outside eyes were smiling in friendly fashion as they stared at Tubby; the middle eye was closed, as though that much of its owner were asleep.

"You—I'm much obliged for what you done," Tubby gasped. The stranger had been kind in scaring away that surgeon—it wouldn't be fair to notice he was deformed. Tubby decided to be wholly gentlemanly and ignore the third eye.

"I didn't want no operation, anyway," he added. "My eye's all right. See?" He blinked it rapidly to confirm the fact.

"Of course," said the stranger. He laid his tall hat carefully on a chair and helped Tubby down to the floor. Tubby, in his bare feet and long white nightgown, stood slightly embarrassed. He raised one foot and hooked it under his other knee.

"Let's get acquainted," he suggested. "You're a friend of mine, ain't you?"

"I am, indeed," rejoined the stranger warmly. "And soon I shall be more than that—your business partner. You and I are going to make millions of dollars."

Tubby blinked both eyes. "Right," he said. "We're goin' to get rich. What's your name? We got to get acquainted first."

"My name is Professor Secr," said the stranger with dignity.

"Mine's Tubby. Pleased to meet you, professor."

They shook hands.

"What are you professor of?" Tubby asked, after a short but awkward silence. The professor had been regarding Tubby thoughtfully with his two opened eyes. He pulled himself out of his reverie at the question.

"I'm a professor of optics," he said impressively. "The science of human sight. I know all about it—all there is to know."

Tubby shook hands again. "That's fine, professor. We're goin' to get rich? Tell me how."

"Not here," the professor objected. "My laboratory is right down the street. Get dressed and come along." He was poking about the room. Tubby saw his own clothes lying on a chair.

Tubby took only a moment to dress. The professor put on his high plug hat—he was more than two feet taller than Tubby with it on—and led the way down the corridor with huge strides that made Tubby almost run to keep up. The hospital was very silent—there seemed to be nobody in it.

They walked down nine flights of stairs and came into the lower hall. As they passed the reception room Tubby looked for Jake and Pete; but there was not a single person in sight.

Half a block down the street the professor turned into a dingy hallway, unlocked a door, and ushered Tubby into his laboratory. It was a long, dim room without windows, and lighted by two narrow beams of white light—like small searchlights. Each of these horizontal beams struck the farther wall about six feet from the floor; and in the brilliant circles of illumination two cards were hanging on the wall—cards printed with letters of the alphabet in rows of different size type.

A large table occupied the center of the room. It was littered with a mass of scientific apparatus, none of which Tubby had ever seen before. But scattered in a heap at the nearer end of the table he saw many little magnifying glasses, and a tremendous variety of eyeglasses. Even with his first hasty glance he noticed monocles, ordinary two-eyed glasses and many spectacles which obviously were made for three eyes.

Over against the wall was a large glass cabinet, filled with what looked like surgical instruments. There was an operating table there also, and other

paraphernalia such as Tubby had noticed in the operating room of the hospital. He shuddered and looked away. The professor closed the door behind them and lighted a small electric bulb. It was red; it threw a weird reddish glare over the lower part of the room beneath the horizontal beams of the white searchlights. Simultaneously, two little violet beams of light darted out from the wall and started upward to the ceiling.

"This is my workshop," explained the professor, casting an appreciative glance about the room. "There is only one absolutely complete and modern optical laboratory in the world. This is it. Sit down, Tubby."

Tubby sat down in a chair near at hand. He wanted to ask about those three-eyed glasses, but decided it would not be gentlemanly. And didn't the professor ever open that third eye?

"You said we're goin' to get rich, professor," he ventured. "Tell me how."

The professor stood before him with folded arms, regarding him thoughtfully with his two opened eyes.

"I have selected you," he began slowly, "because of your wonderfully clever scientific mind. You have a scientific mind, haven't you?"

"No—yes," answered Tubby.

"So have I," said the professor. "But I have been studying optics so many years I have neglected everything else. It is *your* knowledge in the other departments of science that I need now. Together we will become rich, marvelously, fabulously rich."

"Right," assented Tubby. "Tell me how."

The professor sat down. "I have made a wonderful discovery," he went on after a moment. His voice was deeper than ever; he seemed awe-struck by what he was about to say. "I have made the most wonderful optical discovery since the beginning of the world."

"Right," said Tubby. "It's a big discovery. Ain't I right? Tell me what it is."

The professor drew a long breath. "I have located more than a hundred tons of twenty-dollar gold pieces! I can see them. I'm going to let you see them in a moment."

Tubby's heart leaped into his throat; he swallowed it hastily.

"Fine," he declared. "Let's see 'em."

The professor sighed. "First I shall have to tell you how I found them, so that you will understand our problem." He sighed again, more heavily. "It is a terrible, scientific problem. I hope you can solve it."

Tubby stood up. "You give me a look at them twenty-dollar gold pieces. That's all I ask—just give me a look."

The professor smiled sorrowfully. "I will. I'll show them to you right here. I'll let you stand right among them. But sit down now. I have much to tell you first."

Tubby sat down reluctantly.

"You do not understand the theory of stereoscopic vision, I assume?" the professor asked.

"Yes—no," said Tubby.

"Stereoscopic vision means what you see by using two eyes simultaneously. Now—"

"Oh," said Tubby. "Jake says—"

The professor paid no attention to the interruption. "I must explain about dimensions first. We are living, you understand, in a world of three dimensions."

"Length, breadth, an' thickness," Tubby elaborated promptly.

The professor beamed. "Precisely. You *have* a scientific mind. I knew you had. Now to proceed. What is it has *location*, but no dimensions?"

"Search me," said Tubby.

"A point. And what has one dimension?"

Tubby wrinkled his forehead, struggling to think. "I give it up," he declared finally. "You tell."

"A line," said the professor. "A line has only one dimension—length."

"So has time," suggested Tubby.

The professor smiled. "You will have your little joke, I see. You're a clever man. I like clever men."

"Right," said Tubby. "Go on to two dimensions."

"A square has two dimensions—or any plane figure. Also a shadow. And you and I have three dimensions—also almost everything else in the world about us."

Tubby nodded. "A table, for instance."

"Yes—a table. Now that brings us to the theory of stereoscopic vision. You understand that with one eye we can see only two dimensions—length and breadth, but no thickness. To put it more technically, with one eye there is no depth to the field of vision. The scene might just as well be painted on a piece of canvas. It is a little difficult to distinguish the difference at first, because if you painted a scene in perfect perspective, life size and in full natural colors, even on a flat canvas it would look very realistic. There *is* a very great difference, however. Would you like a demonstration?"

"Sure," said Tubby. "Give me a demonstration."

The professor rose to his feet. "I have here two lead pencils. I am going to hang them in that beam of white light a few feet from you. Don't look now."

Tubby covered his face. At the professor's command he looked up with one eye, his hand holding the other closed. Hanging in the white light by invisible wires, were two lead pencils.

"How far away are they?" the professor asked.

"'Bout ten feet," Tubby estimated.

"And which one is nearer to you?"

Tubby indicated the right hand one, which was apparently about a foot in front of the other.

The professor laughed. "Look with two eyes."

Tubby opened his other eye, and was amazed. He had assumed the lead pencils were of usual size. They weren't. They were very much larger, and they were hanging at least twenty feet away from him. He had also assumed they were equal in size. But in that he was also mistaken. The right hand one was larger than its mate, and instead of being in front was exactly beside it.

"You see," said the professor, "everything looks flat. There is no depth to

your field of vision with one eye. You were instinctively trying to guess the depth by judging the apparent size of things. If you had known how big those pencils were you could have guessed their position."

Tubby was looking with one eye again. "I can give you three dimensions of that table," he declared.

"Of course, you can," laughed the professor. "Because you are judging by how much smaller the back of the table looks than the front. The mind acts subconsciously on that, of course. But you don't *see* any depth—any thickness—to that table—you only guess at it. The laws of perspective make you think you see the third dimension, but you don't see it."

So Jake was right! "Tell me how it works," urged Tubby with interest.

"It is very simple," said the professor. "And yet, in a way, it is very complicated."

He held a little cube of sugar a few inches from Tubby's eyes. "When you look at that with only your right eye, you see the front face and part of the right side. Is that so?"

Tubby tried it, and nodded.

"And with the left eye alone, you also see the front face, but instead of the right side you now see part of the *left* side. Do you?"

"No—yes," said Tubby. "Sure I do."

"Very well. Now, with *two* eyes you combine both of those images. Your eyes see the object from different view points. Look now with both eyes. Now you see the front face of the cube and partially around *both* its sides. *That* is what gives you the third dimension—it is what makes that cube look solid. With one eye it merely looks like a picture of a lump of sugar—a flat picture, printed on a flat page. Do you follow me?"

"Yes—no," said Tubby. "Tell me more. Tell me about them tons of twenty-dollar gold pieces."

The professor nodded. "In a few moments I'll show them to you."

Tubby resigned himself to wait. The professor continued:

"It is the *combination in your brain* of the different images your left and right eyes see that gives you a perception of our world of three dimensions. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely," declared Tubby.

"Very well. Now listen carefully. One eye gives two dimensions. Two eyes give three dimensions. And then *three* eyes—" The professor paused expectantly.

"Three eyes—" prompted Tubby breathlessly.

"Why, three eyes give four dimensions," said the professor triumphantly. "With three eyes rightly equipped you can see that other world lying all about us—that other world science has been trying for so long to discover—the world of the Fourth Dimension! *That* is the world that holds our tons of twenty-dollar gold pieces!"

Tubby gasped. So that was why the professor had three eyes. He could see into another world, where there were a hundred tons of twenty-dollar gold pieces lying all about!

"That is my discovery," the professor reiterated. "The most remarkable

optical discovery since the beginning of the world. *I* made it. You observe my third eye?"

"Yes—no," replied Tubby. "It ain't so very noticeable," he added deprecatingly.

"I am an expert surgeon also," continued the professor. "I have to be. I gave myself that third eye. It's a very delicate operation, but I can perform it easily. I'm going to give you one in a moment."

Tubby was frightened. "You needn't bother," he declared. "I ain't interested. I—"

"Oh, it won't hurt you," laughed the professor. "I am a modern surgeon—I never hurt anybody." He unrolled his long length from the chair and stood up briskly. "Come over here and pick out the kind of eye you'd like."

Tubby remembered the tons of gold pieces; he stifled his fear and followed the professor across the room. A long, narrow shelf ran along the wall. On it stood a row of little glass bottles all filled with a colorless liquid. And in each bottle floated a single eyeball.

Tubby walked down the length of shelf. The eyeballs stared at him unswervingly.

"You'd better take a blue one," said the professor. "Your other eyes are blue. Medium size—light blue. Here, this one is a good match." He selected a bottle.

Tubby lay back in what looked like a dentist's chair. The professor opened the surgical cabinet and selected several wicked looking instruments. He touched a switch, and a narrow little beam of rich yellow light sprang from the cabinet and focused itself on the bridge of Tubby's nose.

"You—ain't goin' to hurt me?" Tubby quavered.

The professor answered reassuringly: "No. This yellow light will deaden all pain. It's a wonderful light. *I* discovered it. Close your eyes now. I won't take long."

Tubby gripped the arm of his chair and closed his eyes. For five minutes the professor hammered, chiseled and sawed—cutting a hole in his forehead. It felt extremely unpleasant, but it did not hurt. When the hole was ready, the professor fitted in the eyeball.

"Just a moment now," he murmured. "Very delicate—this joining the optic nerve. Just a moment—hold still."

Five minutes more and the eyelid, with its lashes all complete, was in place. The professor tied a bandage over the new eye—a wet, hot bandage.

"All right," he exclaimed cheerfully. "Now you can sit up."

Tubby sat up, opening his two original eyes and feeling the bandage dubiously. He had three eyes! Now he could see tons of twenty-dollar gold pieces!

"Right," he said. "That wasn't hard. What do we do next?"

The professor replaced his instruments, and then led Tubby back across the room to their former chairs.

"It is now only a question of lights," he said. "You understand that this Fourth Dimension is a different kind of matter. It occupies the same space as our world, because it is matter in a totally different state—a state where the molecules are very widely separated, and are in very rapid vibration. In order

to make it visible to us—in addition to needing the view points of three eyes simultaneously, we must use lights of a much faster vibration than the range of the solar spectrum. These are my own lights—I invented them."

He turned off the red light and the two white searchlights. At once many other tiny beams sprang from hidden orifices—deep violet beams—several of very pale indigo—and others that seemed to be almost phosphorescent. These beams of light were all oscillating rapidly back and forth. The room was a confused riot of weird color—like the darkened stage of a comic opera with a score of whirling, colored spotlights upon it. Tubby grew dizzy staring at it.

"There," said the professor. "I think I have everything adjusted correctly. Now we need colored eyeglasses."

From the table he carefully selected two spectacles each with three different colored lenses. "Take the bandage off, Tubby—but be careful to keep your new eye closed."

Tubby followed directions, and fitted a pair of the three-eyed spectacles to his nose.

"Now," said the professor. His voice trembled with emotion, though he seemed trying to speak calmly. "Sit down again—you may feel dizzy at first. Now—open all three eyes."

Tubby opened his three eyes. All he saw at first was a dim grayness, as though he were in the midst of a heavy fog. The room with its myriad colors had evaporated.

The professor's voice came from behind him. "Hold steady for a moment—your eyes will be adjusted to it soon."

Tubby sat staring into the fog. It seemed shifting and crawling upon itself. Then, in the distance, gray shapes began forming. Were they in the distance? He couldn't seem to tell how far away they were. Perhaps they were close at hand? Of course they were. There was no doubt about it now. He made out an angle of wall—a shadowy, white wall, with a ceiling above and a floor below.

The professor's voice said: "We are looking now at a room in the world of the Fourth Dimension. We are in it—it occupies almost the same space as my laboratory. Now—do you see the gold?"

Tubby saw it, indeed. The fog was lifting rapidly. He was sitting in a huge, bare, windowless room whose outlines were all blurred and quivering, but now plainly discernible. There was no way of guessing the size of the room. It might have been half a mile long—or twenty feet. And curiously enough, the back part of it looked larger than the front! Things got larger farther away, instead of smaller. Tubby was not concerned with this anomaly, however; he was feasting all three of his eyes on the gold. It was heaped in profusion all over the room—great piles of shining yellow gold pieces!

"For ten years I have searched for this spot," said the professor, triumphantly. "I found it, and that's why I built my laboratory right here. We are inside the mint of the world of the Fourth Dimension!"

Tubby stood up, trembling with excitement. He felt very dizzy and nauseated, but he forgot it in the excitement. The mint of the Fourth Dimension!



A hundred tons of gleaming yellow gold pieces—and he was standing right among them!

He looked down at his feet. The coins were piled all around him. The floor was strewn thick with them everywhere. He kicked one foot into them. Nothing happened! There was no sound; his foot seemed to touch nothing but empty air. Where *was* his foot? He couldn't see it. Or his leg. Or his hand, which he held before him!

Panic seized Tubby. Was he a ghost? Couldn't he even see his own feet?

The professor answered his thoughts. "Your body is still in your own world, Tubby—the world of three dimensions. Only your vision has penetrated into the Fourth Dimension. You can see that gold, but—" A sob choked the professor's voice at the pathos of it—"but Tubby, you—we cannot touch that gold—we can do nothing with it except look at it!"

Tubby stooped down frantically to gather up a handful of the coins. He felt his fingers scraping along the bare boards of the professor's laboratory. He touched his foot. But he could not see his hands. Or his feet. He could only see the heaps of glistening coins that lay there undisturbed!

The professor's voice wailed dimly: "The gold is right there, Tubby. Your fingers are going right through it. But you cannot feel it—you cannot touch it. You can only look at it—only look at it—"

The words trailed away into silence. Tubby climbed to his feet, and then sat down in his chair, nonplused. What a horrible thing! You could see the gold, but you couldn't touch it! That was all wrong. The professor would have to figure some way of getting that gold out of the Fourth Dimension. They'd figure it together. The professor would—

Where *was* the professor? The room was quite silent. Tubby felt suddenly very weak and sick. He lay back at full length in the chair and closed his eyes. His new eye hurt him. Or was it his new eye? Wasn't that pain shooting through his left eye? It must be his left eye—there seemed to be a bandage over it.

There was a dim murmur of voices in the room—familiar voices. They seemed to have been there a long time, but Tubby just noticed them. He opened one eye—his right eye—and saw a swaying expanse of white sheet, with the white enameled foot of a hospital cot just beyond his toes. The scene stopped swaying and grew clearer. A hand touched his forearm. He turned his head weakly, and stared with his one eye into the anxious faces of his two friends who were sitting beside the bed.

"Hello, Tubby!" exclaimed the first man with relief. "You didn't die, did you? I knew you wouldn't."

"You're right, Jake," agreed the second man. "He didn't die, did he?"

# The Cave of the Invisible

by James Francis Dwyer

*Here is a truly different story, a story which breathes the color and life of the South Pacific, pregnant with the suspense of the unknown, and carrying a suggestion of a conception that may have more bards than we suspect. James Francis Dwyer, an Australian, world-traveler, a man who has seen and lived much of the color he writes of, presents a strange thought; we know that plants and animals and rocks have changed, that the things which walk the earth and the earth itself are altered from what they were in ages past. Then why not the very air itself, hints Dwyer . . . and brings forth the curiously chilling thought that there yet awaits us in closed places and sealed underground bubbles the living air of a dead and lost era. Here is that story of fossil air—which may be not quite as lifeless a fossil as museums are accustomed to.*

I

AN KROMHOUT, the big Dutch naturalist, lowered himself into a huge rattan chair and looked out across the green swath of palms and canarium trees. Kromhout's camp, in which I was a guest, was close to the village of Brajanolon, in central Java; and from the terrace of the bungalow we could see the great Temple of Bororboedoe. In splendid majesty it rose before us; the mighty Tjandi Bororboedoe, "Shrine of the Many Buddhas."

Not as large as the monuments of Angkor Wat, Ajanta and Alara, the Temple of Bororboedoe is considered more beautiful in architectural design. Its carvings, still intact after twelve hundred years, brings thousands of tourists to stare at the bas-reliefs. Those bas-reliefs, if placed in a straight line, would extend for more than three miles. Here was the center of Buddhist influence in Java in the Sixth Century. . . .

"Belief is a strange thing," said Kromhout, his eyes upon the temple. "There are many places throughout the world where the atmosphere has been charged with a definite spiritual quality put into it by the reverence of believers. Buddhism in Java is dead—Mohammedanism has throttled it, but a blind person who came close to this sanctuary would sense the awe and mystery that is still here. Still here after centuries have passed. In, into the mixture of oxygen, hydrogen and carbon-dioxide has filtered a spiritual compound that does not react to the instruments of the scientists. It is Faith.

"Do you know that argon, one of the constituents of the atmosphere, was only discovered forty years ago? It is present in seven or eight parts to a

thousand in the air we breathe; but we did not know it was there till Lord Rayleigh and Sir William Ramsay discovered it toward the end of the last century. That discovery makes me hopeful. Sometimes—sometimes I think that in the days to come, we might have instruments so delicate that we could measure the spiritual intensity of places like this temple. Measure the degree of faith, of hope, of longing for a better world. I would like to measure the holy dreams that fill the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, that was built in about 1300, or the air of St. Paul's and St. Peter's, or that place in the Mosque of Saint Sophia at Stamboul that is called "The Holy Wisdom."

For a long interval the big naturalist remained quiet; then with a strange eagerness in his voice he went on: "If such an instrument were perfected, one might also be able to measure the devilish quality of places. Of demon-filled places that I have visited in the Malay."

In silence we sat and stared at Tjandi Bororhoodoer. The sun had set; and a soft rose tint spread slowly over the porous trachyte and lava blocks of which the temple is constructed. This tint deepened to a gorgeous crimson, changed to a dark red; then with a fierce suddenness the tropic night plunged upon the building and blotted it out.

Filled with black gloom now were the interminable galleries with their two hundred scenes of Buddha's spiritual experiences. Invisible were the thrilling bas-reliefs beginning with that of Māya, the mother of Buddha, watching the white elephant descending on a lotus flower from heaven to symbolize the conception of her son, and ending with the last thrilling scenes that show the weapons of the Prince of Darkness turning into flower petals as they fall upon the head of the saint.

From the soft dusk came the voice of Jan Kromhout. The great Buddhist sanctuary seemed to be nearer now. It was, I thought, squatting just beyond the row of flame trees whose red flowers perfumed the night.

"At times," said the big Dutchman, "the East frightens me. I become the victim of terrors. Then I pack my things and take a trip home to Amsterdam, so that I can get my courage back. There is sanity in Holland. Much sanity. I am nearer to God when I put my feet on Kalver Straat. I go and sit in the Oude Kerk, and those stained-glass windows of the Lady Chapel make me feel clean and good. There is a lot of faith in stained glass. And I go to the Ryks Museum and look at the fine pictures by Frans Hals and Rembrandt and Rubens, and so I cure myself. *Ja, ja*. I cure myself.

"Five years ago I went back to see my sister and her husband. I stayed a month; then the East came in the night and whispered to me. I thought that the whimperings of little animals came up to my room from the Leidsche Kade. My sister cried and begged me to stay, but I could not.

"On the ship that brought me to Batavia, I made friends with a strange man. He was a Russian named Andrey Ilyin, and he was an archaeologist. He was but thirty-four years of age, and he was big and strong and bold-looking. And he was a dreamer. A great dreamer. Some one has said that there is no rest for the man who is both a dreamer and a man of action, and this Russian was of that type. He knew the East. He thought it the cradle of life, the home of all the mysteries. He had many ideas that were disturbing;

and in the hot, heavy nights crossing the Indian Ocean we stayed up on deck and argued till the dawn.

"He put forward theories that were not supported by scientific evidence; but that lack of evidence did not trouble him. *Nees*. He just jumped across the gulfs, and when you asked him how he got to the other side, he laughed. He thought that scientists lacked imagination, that they spent too much time building bridges instead of hopping mentally to the other side. It may be so. Dreamers see many things.

"One of his theories I had big cause to remember. I will never forget it. He thought that longevity was a matter of breathing the same atmosphere that we had started to breathe. That life depended on the constancy of the atmosphere. You see, we did not know what the atmosphere was composed of, till Cavendish made his tests at the end of the Seventeenth Century. And Cavendish did not know of argon and of other substances.

"'The atmosphere we are breathing is not the same as the Pleistocene or the Neolithic man breathed,' said Ilyn. 'It is not the atmosphere in which the mammoth and the dinosaur lived. We know nothing of its composition in those days. A change in it might have killed them off. Then again the longevity of Methuselah might be accounted for by the air he breathed. Some special brand.'

"Sometimes he made me laugh; sometimes he puzzled me. When we were near Tandjong Priok, he told me the reason of his visit. He was searching for old atmosphere! *Old, ja, oud!* Atmosphere that had not changed for hundreds of years. Air which was the same air that blew over the Malay in the days when King Asoka sent a piece of Buddha's body to Java as propaganda for Buddhism. They were good propagandists in those days.

"'How can you find such a place?' I asked Ilyn.

"'There might be an old temple bottled up and forgotten,' he said. 'You know how wine gets better with age? If I found such a place, the atmosphere might have improved.'

"I said good-by to that Russian at Tandjong Priok. I was not sorry. He talked too much. We Dutch say, *Der gaan veel woorden in een zak*. Many words go to one sack."

Kromhout rose from his chair as a soft whinger came from within the bungalow. The black ape was on the point of becoming a mother, and the big naturalist went inside to comfort her. I could hear his voice assuring her that he was close by, and that no harm could befall her.

Returning to the veranda, he took up his story. "I went here and there in my business of collecting specimens. I made a trip to Samarinda in Dutch Borneo, and I went from there to Makassar and on to the little San Miguel group in the Sulu Sea. Now and then I thought of that Russian and his theories. It was not easy to forget him. Ideas that are a little crazy stay in our heads when we forget matters that are founded on common sense.

"I came back to Batavia, and I got a commission which took me to the volcanic country near Padjajaran. It is bad. The sulphur fumes and the carbonic gas kill birds and animals that are fool enough to stay around. It is a little

piece of country that looks as if it might blow up at any moment, when some of the old volcanoes start their fires again.

"I had been there two weeks when that Russian fellow Ilyin walked into my camp. 'It is old *Tête-de-Fromage*!' he cried. 'Old *Tête-de-Fromage* who will not be convinced!'

"He told me that he was camped some fifteen miles away, and that he was quite happy and contented. 'I heard that a Dutchman was trapping here, and I thought it might be you,' he said. 'I'm pleased because I wanted to tell you something. You remember our talks about atmosphere? Well, I have found proof of what I said to you on the ship.'

"'What have you found?' I asked.

"He grinned at me. 'I have found a place where the air is six hundred years old,' he said. 'Six hundred years old, and pure.'

"'Pure?' I asked.

"'That is what I said, Dutchman,' he answered. 'Dry and pure. It has been bottled up for centuries. Six centuries or more. There has been no opening except one small door that is not used once in a century. The things living there, toads and lichen, die immediately when brought in contact with modern air.'

"'You mean that they are killed by the light?' I said.

"'No, by the air,' said Ilyin. 'I have moved them in the night. It is the air that kills them.'

"I sat silent, waiting for him to tell me more, and he did. 'There is something else about this place,' he said. 'Something extraordinary: the Past is there.'

"'How?' I snapped.

"'In the atmosphere,' he said quietly. 'The air of the place is impregnated with old memories. It has clung to them. They have been held in a sort of atmospheric solution because there has been no fresh air to disturb them. At times—at times you can feel and see enough to reconstruct what happened there.'

"'Ja,' I said, 'I know all about those spots. They are not good. They are vicious. If you go trying to reconstruct events that have happened here six hundred years ago, you will get yourself into the crazy house, and the Dutch will ship you back to Russia.'

"'Imagination,' said that fellow, 'is one of the greatest gifts of God. The straight back-heads of the Dutch and the Germans make it impossible for them to carry the gift. If you feel inclined to come over and visit me, I will show you all the proof that you want.'

"Of course I was curious to know what that fellow had found. My skin prickled with curiosity. He had given me directions; and three days after his visit, I went along the jungle path that led to his camp. That part of Java has many old temples. Quite close are the ruins of Brambaran, which was a Brahman temple dedicated to Vishnu and Shiva. I found that Ilyin's camp was alongside a small temple so completely covered with crawling vines that you might pass it, thinking it was a green hill.

"Ilyin grinned when he saw me. 'I knew you would come,' he said; 'I have

been watching the road for three days. Cheese and mysteries are great things to attract Dutch naturalists. Tell me, Kronshtout, why you people put car-away seeds in your cheese?

"'To make fools ask the reason,' I snapped. 'Where is your old atmosphere that you were bragging about?'

"'You must not approach it in that spirit,' said Ilyin. 'You see, there are reasons. I am not the owner or the real discoverer. I will introduce you, but if you please, try to look as if you believed, even if you lack the imagination to see beyond your nose.'

"I was annoyed, but I had come to see what I could see, so I followed Ilyin through the jungle till we came to a thatched hut. In the hut were an old man and a girl of about eighteen. First I will tell of the man. He was a Sundanese; and when I saw him, he was what is called *latuk*. His eyes were glazed and his nostrils distended. I did not like the look of him.

"The girl—*Aak!* the girl was something that the gods of the jungle had made to peep at. She was just meeting womanhood. Her skin was of beaten gold, and all the dreams of the world were in her big frightened eyes. Eyes like the little musk deer that spoke to you, saying, 'Do not harm me; I am nice and innocent and I will be good.' /a, they were wonderful eyes. And she had little teeth so white and beautiful that you wished that she could get annoyed and bite you with them. And she was dressed as she should be dressed. She had a six-foot strip of scarlet silk wound tightly around her waist, then thrown loosely across her bosom and over one of her shoulders. Sometimes that sash slipped from her shoulder, or maybe the little devils of the jungle pulled it away. In her left nostril she had a small ruby that winked at you as much as to say: 'Wouldn't you like my job?'

"Ilyin spoke to the Sundanese, but that fellow was in dreamland and did not hear. The girl answered for him. She said we could not visit the temple that day. The man was *latuk*; I would have to wait. That Russian tried to bully her, but she would not give way, although she was afraid of Ilyin, who was big and strong and did not think much of women. When that scarlet sash slipped from the girl's shoulder, Ilyin would grin like a tiger that meets a young antelope.

"'Dutchman, you must stick around,' he said. 'It will be worth it. You will know things after you have seen what I have seen.'

"For three days we waited. And we argued a lot. When I spoke of Hamme's '*Handbuch der Klimatologie*' or Woekol's '*Die Klimate der Erde*,' that Russian would laugh at me. 'All the fellows that have written about climate and atmosphere write of them in relation to health and industry and crops,' he said. 'Not one of the idiots writes about the relation of climate to the soul. They tell how altitude affects the circulation and respiration of the body, and how winds are bad for persons with certain complaints, but they say nothing of the effect of places on the vital principle, on the spirit. Look at this place! Wouldn't the atmosphere of this spot transform a man? Wouldn't it get into his blood?'

"'If the damned leeches left him any blood!' I snapped. There was a strange quality around that place, but I would not let that Russian bully me. There is

something that you say in the United States. *Ja!* That is it: you say 'I am from Missouri.' Well, I was from Amsterdam, and I wanted to be shown too."

Again the black ape called to the naturalist. Kromhout hoisted himself from the chair and hurried to comfort her. As I listened, I detected a whispering accompaniment to his words. Other small captives knew of the condition of the black ape, and were troubled.

"On the fourth day that Sundanese got over his bout with hashish," continued Kromhout, as he returned. "He did not like me. He said the place was *krassar*; that meant it was too sacred and magical for me to put my big feet inside it. Ilyin swore at him. At last the Sundanese gave way.

"First we entered the temple proper. That was only an antechamber to the real place. But we entered quick, so that not much fresh air could get in, and that no old air could escape. It was quite dark, but the Sundanese took my hand and led me. I would sooner have had the little hand of the girl, but that Russian had grabbed her as a guide.

"'Why not a flashlight?' I asked.

"'There is no need for one,' said Ilyin. 'There is light in the vault where we are going.'

"That puzzled me, but I said nothing. We came to the far end of the temple and climbed down a stone stairway. I could see nothing, but I understood that we were in front of a stone doorway. Ilyin spoke to me. 'It is necessary to enter quick,' he said. 'When the old man pulls the lever, the stone will swing back. It will be light then. Sara, the girl, will go first, then you, then I and the old man. But move quick! *Poskoréel Poskoréel!*' He was all excited.

"I could not understand how it would be light when the stone door opened, but I said nothing. Then the door swung back, and I found that Ilyin had spoken the truth. Through the lighted space hopped the girl; I stumbled after her, and after me came Ilyin and the old man.

"We were twenty feet underground, and there was no opening to that vault except the door through which we had come, but the place was illuminated. It was lit up like a phosphorescent sea. I thought for a moment that the light came from millions of fireflies, or the luminous beetles of the *Lampyridæ* that are related to glow-worms. I was wrong. The light came from a type of lichen that I had never seen. A variety of *Lecanora calaranea* that is mentioned by Engler and Prantl in their book '*Die natürlichen Pflanzenfamilien*.' It sweats in the dark places where it grows, and its sweat is phosphorescent.

"That lichen covered the walls and the roof of that big vault—covered them like a silver tapestry. Lichen is strange stuff. Some day when the world dies, the lichen will make a death shroud. *Ja, ja.* And it will be very pretty. The blue-green alga, the red and yellow *Agarum*, and the phosphorescent *Lecanora* that covered the walls and roof of that great vault. Lichen is the beard of death.

"After I got over the shock from that growing stuff, I noticed the air. It was heavy, very heavy. It was so thick that you thought you could chew it, but it was not unpleasant. Not at all. It was soothing. Have you ever tried anium? *Norn?* Well, the air of that place brought to me the nice loosening

of the nerves that you get after the first whiffs of an opium pipe. It rubbed against my face like an invisible kitten. It touched my hands and my bare calves. It got into my hair and tickled my scalp. It had the ways of a bazaar woman. Now and then I swung round with the belief that some one had touched me with a finger on the back of the neck.

"There were small toads hopping about on the stone floor of the vault—the *jerboa* type of toad, with long legs. Ilyin, the old man, and the girl Sara took care not to step on the toads; and when the girl saw that I did not take much care, she spoke to the Russian, and he whispered to me: 'Please be careful,' he said; 'the old man will get annoyed if you squash them.'

"'Why?' I asked.

"'The old man speaks to them,' said Ilyin. 'When he wants to show me something extraordinary, he tells them to keep close to the wall so that they will not be trodden on by the others.'

"'What others?' I snapped.

"'You'll see,' he grinned. 'You'll see, Dutchman.'

"He was full of mystery, was that fellow. It was bubbling out of him. And the air that had fingers, and the phosphorescent lichen, were the hypodermic syringes with which he tried to squirt it into my system.

"We walked the length of that place. It was enormous. The pillars were beautifully carved with figures of birds and monkeys, and at the bottom of each pillar was a square stone box like those at Brumbanan, that are filled with the dust of the dead. We did not speak. The only sounds were the *slap-slap* of the toads as their bellies hit the floor. It was not nice. The only sweet thing in that place was the girl. I thought she was afraid of that vault—quite a lot afraid of it.

"We came out from that place in the same manner as we went in—slipping quickly through the door at the bottom of the stairs. For an hour or so I felt that I had been drugged; then I was myself again, and able to argue with that Russian. I had to admit that the air was curious, but more I would not admit.

"'You have no imagination!' cried Ilyin. 'The French named you Dutch well when they called you *Têtes-de-Frémage*. Cheese-heads you are! You could not feel the Past in that place?'

"'I felt the air, and I heard the *jerboa* toads,' I said. 'Not more than that. It is good to have belief, but it is not good to have too much of it. That is the way to madness.'

"'Wait around,' said the Russian; 'you will see what you will see. The girl has promised me.'

"He smacked his lips when he spoke of that girl. There are two nations that strut when they speak of women—the Germans and the Russians; but the Russian has more charm. He is more dashing. He is a little mad, and women like madmen.

"I wanted to go away from that place, but I could not. It held me there because I felt that something would happen, something big. Have you noticed that lots of tragedies have been photographed? Those photographers have been there with the machines aiming at the spot where an automobile turns



over, or some racehorse falls down, or that Balkan king is shot. You think it is luck? It is not. The man with the camera sensed the accident before it happened. That is what makes the good press photographer. Sometime I will tell you a story about that business of sensing a smash.

"Each day I would see that Russian stalking the girl. Ja, stalking her like a black panther stalking a mouse deer. Whenever I saw the flash of her scarlet sarong in the jungle, I would see Ilyin close to her. And I would watch her eyes and watch those of the Russian. The fear was growing greater in hers; in his was the belief that he would conquer. He would pull his mustaches and brag about the girls that had loved him in Moscow when he was at the university. He made me sick with his talk.

"'You had better watch that old man,' I said to him.

"'Pooh!' he cried. 'He is nothing. The girl—ah, the girl is something precious. Do you know, Kromhout, that she believes she is a reincarnation from other days? She speaks as if she was around here when things were happening.'

"'Then she will know too much for you,' I snapped.

"'No woman knows too much for me,' said that fool. 'At the university they called me "Little Andrey, the Fisher of Souls." She will be mine very soon.'

"Men are fools. We Dutch say: 'Roasted pigeons do not fly through the air.' It is a good proverb.

"One morning I saw that old Sundanese creeping through the jungle on his hands and knees. I could not see Ilyin or the girl, but I guessed that old man was hunting for them.

"That afternoon Ilyin was very gay. He sang little Russian songs that were all about girls who loved very much and who were willing to kill themselves for fellows. He sang them in his own language, but he translated them for me. I thought them foolish. Dutch girls would not do the things that those songs told of. Not much. Dutch girls keep their feet on the ground very hard.

"'Tonight, Kromhout,' said Ilyin, 'something might happen. It has been a big day for me. Sava loves me. Daf She loves me a lot. And she has promised me that she will make old sulky Mokhan put on a show tonight to celebrate our love-pact. In that vault we might see the Past.'

The naturalist paused in his narrative. He sat silent in his big chair. I thought he might be marshaling the events of that evening of long ago, putting them in order, shaping them so that they could be intelligible. Or perhaps he thought that the pause might let the caressing fingers of the Malaysian night bring to my mind the capacity for belief. Belief in the strange tale that he wished to unfold.

"It happened as that Russian thought it would happen," he said, and his voice was lowered as if afraid that the Tjandi Bororboedoer, squatting out in the thick darkness, might be annoyed at hearing him tell of the secrets of the long-buried past. "The girl persuaded the old man to put on a big show. Ja, a big show. And he did!

"When we climbed down into that vault, I thought the lichen was more phosphorescent than the first time. It might have been just fancy. I don't

know. Perhaps I was excited. The air was that air that had fingers which tickled the back of my neck and rubbed my scalp.

"The Russian did not know what was going to happen. I do not think the girl knew. It was just the business of the old man. He was not *latah* now. He was alive. His black eyes were sparkling, and at times I thought there was a grin of delight on his face.

"We had walked about twenty paces when the noise started. *Ja*, the noise. It started at the far end of the vault, some hundred feet from where we were standing; and it came creeping toward us, eating up the silence. Eating up the silence like a great invisible mouth. It was funny. At first it was not a great noise. It was soft and rather soothing, but as it crept nearer and nearer, it became louder. Much louder.

"Now and then it would stop for a few seconds—stop as if it had been throttled. And all our eyes were turned to the spot where it had halted. Do you understand? We knew, although we could see nothing, that it had reached a certain point. It was near this or that carved pillar that supported the roof. A noise made by something that we could not see. Moving and stopping, moving and stopping.

"It grew louder. Much louder. New noises joined up with it. Noises that I could not place, noises that had been lost to the world when that temple went out of business. There was a devilish rumble that seemed to be the backbone of the clamor. It came at intervals. It seemed to shake the temple. And it carried a poisonous fear with it. Drums of hell was that noise. *Ja*, drums of hell!

"When that big queer noise came, I thought the veins in my head would burst. It led the others to a sort of crescendo; then it snapped off quick so that it hurt your head. And you could see nothing. Nothing at all. In that vast underground vault there was only the old man, Ilyin, the girl and myself. *Ja*, and the toads. Those toads were banked now inches high around the walls and around the pillars. They were afraid—those toads. Possibly they saw things that we did not see. That *bufo-jerboa* is clever. Very clever.

"Closer and closer came that racket. Bulging its way toward us! I leaned forward, pop-eyed and sweating, in an effort to see something. I have heard all the noises of the jungle, but I have never heard noises like those. They were devilish. They were beyond the intelligence of man. They woke memories of things that were snaky and slimy, things of the past when the bull-roarer struck fear into the hearts of those who heard it.

"In the bones of our ears are echoes that have been asleep for hundreds of years. Frightening echoes. They are in the cells of our brains. They are part of us. We collected them in our climb out of the dark womb of the world. This civilization of ours is a small thing. It is of yesterday. It is the thin scum of conceit that we have placed upon the terrors of other days. And when we are frightened, that scum that is civilization, that is modernity, that is law and order and smugness and silly pomp and humbug, is broken by those memories that are mostly hooked up with sounds.

"They come out of the depths. The beat of the tom-toms, the clang of the devil-gongs, the hiss of big serpents, the whirring of the wings of vampires

and pterodactyls. *And!* This memory of ours is a terrible thing—for the subconscious is filled with sounds. There is stored the bellow of the mammoth and the sound made by the slime dripping from the scaly legs of the plesiosaurs!

"Now, years after, I can hear those sounds of that vault when the world is quiet. I will always hear them. They are in my flesh, in my bones, in my blood. They are a fear-poison that has got into my body through my ears.

"I wished to run, but I could not. My legs had lost their power. They were boneless, and I was afraid that I would fall to the floor. The noise had swung a little to the left of us, and for that I was glad. You bet I was. If it had swept over us, I would have died from fear.

"The old man, the girl and the Russian did what I did—turned their heads to follow the sound. It was now surging between two great pillars of the vault, surging through them like a cataract of clamor!

"It was then that the girl cried out. She shrieked and pointed. Pointed at nothing that we could see, but something that was plain to her. Something or somebody. Somebody, I think. /a, I am sure that she saw some one, at that instant.

"She shrieked again, and sprang forward; but that Russian was not going to let her get into that racket of noise. He grabbed hold of her waist and tried to hold her. He was strong, as I have told you; but she wished to touch something in the stream of noise. She was slippery like a snake. Her sarong was almost torn from her body as she wrestled; then as she leaped forward again, she and the Russian were in that frightening river of noise. They were in it! We knew!

"That Russian was six feet and a little bit. He weighed two hundred pounds, and he had muscles of steel. But his size and his weight did not matter much then. They were nothing to the forces that were around him. Nothing at all. Something picked him up. For an instant he was held horizontally at about three feet from the floor; then he was jerked head high and thrown across the vault, thrown across with such force that he struck the wall some twenty feet away. Struck it and dropped to the floor.

"That noise stopped then. Stopped with a suddenness that made me think I had become deaf. We did not move till we heard the *slap-dap* of the toads as they moved away from the walls and the pillars. It was comforting to hear those jerboa toads moving about.

"I went over to the Russian. He was quite dead. His head had struck the wall, and his skull was fractured. I remembered his face for a long time. There was fear on it. A great fear. I have often wondered if he saw what it was that picked him up and tossed him across the vault. . . .

"/a, there was an inquiry. The Dutch were angry about that business. They sent a magistrate from Djokja, and police came from Soerakarta. I told what I had seen and heard, and those police grinned. They were stupid fellows who could not believe anything unless they saw it with their little puggy eyes. And the fat magistrate from Djokja was so stuffed with *rystwefel* that there was no room for imagination.

"The girl would not speak. She was a little frightening. That fat magistrate

asked her if the Russian had seduced her; and she looked at him in a way that gave him cold shivers. She did not like that question.

"The old man would not say much. When the magistrate asked him what had made the noise in the vault, he gave a funny answer. He said: 'They are the dead, that the years have eaten their bodies, but whose souls walk.'

"The police ruined that vault. They smashed down a part of the wall, and all that phosphorescent *Lecanora calacarea* shriveled in an instant when it met the air of the day. And those jerboa toads turned over on their backs and died with little croaks. It was a pity. I would have liked that some big man, some scientist of the order of Regnault or Angus Smith, should study the air of that chamber. Now it is too late."

The big Dutchman rose and went within the bungalow.

I sat silently looking out across the dark stretch to where Tjandi Bororboedoor, "Shrine of the Many Buddhas," rose imperially. That foolish idea that the temple had moved closer to hear Kronhout's narrative was still upon me. I was a little afraid.

The big Dutchman reappeared. "The black ape has got a little one," he said, and his voice was soft with tenderness. "Come and look at it. She thinks it is the most wonderful baby ape that the Malay archipelago has ever seen."

# Guard in the Dark

by Allison V. Harding

What is it about toy soldiers, about miniature figurines, which made them a feature of human civilization from time immemorial? The tombs of Egypt's pharaohs were filled with finger-sized replicas of their soldiers, slaves, and advisers. The two-inch tall household gods which perched on the utensils and tables of Greece and Rome linger on in the marching ranks of brightly painted lead soldiers which march and charge across the floors of playrooms and nurseries the world over. These miniatures somehow embody the attributes of life; they are endowed by their owners instinctively (for who has to teach a child to recognize dolls and toy soldiers as beings?) with the qualities of life. Allison V. Harding has woven this into a remarkable and memorable story of toy soldiers who fought a war as grim and deadly in its own miniature way as any flesh-and-blood armies engaged in.

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ROUDLY little Ronald Frost showed the new tutor his row on row of shiny lead soldiers . . . soldiers in the painted khaki of the army, in the navy dark blue, and in the blue with red trimming of the marines. Some were standing, some were marching, some lying on their stomachs, guns pointed forward.

"Look at my machine gunners," said the twelve-year-old boy to Jeffry Wilburts as he pointed to another part of the shelf whereon lay squad after squad of tiny toy figures, each with a machine gun—sub-machine guns and light and heavy ones.

Jeffry nodded interestedly and took some of the pieces off the shelf to look at them more closely.

"Be very careful!" the little boy cautioned as Wilburts minutely examined a soldier holding the miniature replica of an automatic rifle.

"Sure I will. Tell me, Ronald, why do you have so many? You must have several hundred soldiers here."

"Need 'em," said the youngster, his mouth setting in a tight line.

"Do you like to recreate battles, I mean fight out some of the campaigns of the war?" It had occurred to Wilburts that perhaps his pupil's mania for toy soldiers had such a significance.

"Nope."

"Well, what then?"

"I have to have them." Ronald Frost turned away from his toy closet with a fist full of marines. Jeffrey watched him as he meticulously replaced the tin soldiers that had been clustered in groups on the tables and floor of his bedroom.

Jeffrey Wilburts smiled to himself. "Ah, changing the guard, eh?"

"Yes." No more than that. Not very communicative.

Wilburts noticed that Ronald placed the soldiers in a careful pattern. They formed a circle of toy-soldier protection around the center of the room. The center where Ronald Frost's bed was!

When Jeffrey Wilburts, fresh from a teacher's college course, had interviewed Mr. and Mrs. Frost for the job, this had been the main thing they had told him that day in the Frosts' pleasant suburban home.

"He's not at all a dull boy," said Mrs. Frost, with a sort of a perplexed pride, "but he has this fixation about soldiers."

"I'd hate to tell you what our bill is supplying the boy with these lead soldiers," snorted Mr. Frost. "And besides, I think Ronald is getting about old enough to give up playing with toy things like that."

The Frosts had liked young Wilburts and he them. He had taken up residence there as companion and tutor to Ronald. He soon realized that the young Frost lad was no ordinary twelve-year-old. The boy was bright when he wanted to be. He had imagination.

But with all of this Jeffrey detected a certain listlessness that was most unbecoming a chap of Ronald's years. He shunned the company of other children of his age in the neighborhood, and although he did passably well in school—his teacher told Wilburts that he would be an honor-roll pupil if he would only try—his social adjustments were not at all normal.

He detested the games that went on in the school yard and was in the habit of sneaking off home after class was out instead of mixing with his peers in a raid on the local ice-cream parlor.

"We need somebody to bring him out," said Mrs. Frost to Wilburts. "Heaven knows Mr. Frost and I have tried to do all we can for him. . . ."

"You might be able to help my son, er, if I had one, but you can't help your own," quoted Wilburts brightly from something he remembered in a child psychology class.

"It seems you're right," sighed Mrs. Frost. "We can't help him, apparently. I still think a lot of this has to do with those stupid soldiers he's so preoccupied with!"

"I'll try to get the boy got over these ideas," said Mr. Frost with an angry rustle of the paper. "But don't try to just take the soldiers away from him. It's an impossible task." Mr. Frost elaborately rolled his eyes ceilingward. "I tried it once and he got so excited . . . well, we had to call Dr. Brown."

Properly warned and initiated on the way things stood, Wilburts started to apply his great knowledge of child psychology, learned from dusty library tomes and aged professors who were much nearer their second childhood than their first.

Jeffrey quickly decided that he would closely observe the boy. It was prepos-

terous to try and bully the lad. You never got anywhere that way. And it was most old-fashioned.

In the corner of the room, almost behind a screen that hid a wash basin, was an easy chair. Jeffrey made it his in the evenings, ostensibly to chat with Ronald, but really to watch the ritual that went on, commencing when the light sneaked slowly from the room across the sky into the west.

Out of his play closet Ronald would bring scores more soldiers to supplement the ones that, all day, had been grouped in small clusters around the room. Jeffrey watched this procedure for several nights before he felt that it was time to pop a few questions.

This evening Wilburts watched as the twelve-year-old arranged his miniature troops. The tutor was once more taken with the precise and scientific way the lad covered the room with his knots of soldiers.

"Ronald."

"Um?"

"Why do you do this every night?"

"'Cause I need to, that's why."

"You like to have them around you, eh?"

The little boy's face was tight-lipped and grim for one so young. He said nothing for a moment.

"I have to have them around me."

He placed six blue-clad soldiers on the edge of the washstand beside Jeffrey. Wilburts found himself staring at the soldiers fascinatedly. Their uniforms were such exact replicas of the real thing, their equipment so cleverly copied, their little figures stalwart in rigid posture—only their little gray-white lead faces completely unlikelike, expressionless like putty-wax dolls. Wilburts looked from one to the other of the six little figurines. All their faces wore a blank, mysterious, nothingness expression, an ageless passiveness that could only be achieved in lead.

Jeffrey Wilburts counted forty-five soldiers around the room. Some were on the bed table, others, numbering among them several machine gunners, were on the floor at the four corners of the bed.

Wilburts shook his head and after good nights were said went off to his room down the hall. The situation was an intriguing one. Here was a lad who was logical on all subjects as far as he, Jeffrey Wilburts, could make out—and he could make out very well—and yet he had an obsession on soldiers. Wilburts comforted himself to sleep with the thought that the Frosts could not have gotten in a better man for the job of handling the boy.

In the morning, violating his usual custom of dressing and going right down to breakfast, Wilburts went in Ronald's room still in slippers and bathrobe. The boy was bending over something on the floor and didn't hear Jeffrey.

"Morning," said Wilburts lustily.

Young Frost turned quickly, putting his hand behind his back. He glowered at the tutor.

Wilburts started forward slowly. Ah ha, here was something interesting.

He was determined to see what Ronald was hiding. The boy backed away from him as he came on.

"Ronald, what is it you have there?"

The boy said nothing but merely stepped backward until he came against the closet door. He was fumbling for the knob, his eyes hatefully on Jeffrey when the companion stepped forward quickly and pinned Ronald's arms to his sides.

"Now, let me see," grunted Wilburts, surprised at the strength in the youngster's body. The two swayed together for a minute, Ronald's face white with strain and then the man's strength forced the boy's hands outward and forward and then finally the small, tight fingers opened and objects dropped to the floor. Wilburts stepped back, one hand still holding the boy's wrist and bent over.

With his other hand he explored downward. The objects were toy soldiers, or, at least, parts of them. Heads and torsos, legs and arms, little guns broken loose from the soldier that held them to tiny lead bodies—like real soldiers who have been in battle . . . a score of soldiers, broken and bent—dead soldiers!

Ronald stood back now, breathing rapidly. He looked at the floor and then at Wilburts. Jeffrey hardly knew what to do. His first impulse was to grin the whole matter off.

"Say, you've busted up a lot of those soldiers, Ronald."

To cover his own lack of assurance, he put a note of reprimand in his voice as he talked.

The boy said nothing. He simply knelt down and began to gather up the pieces of the broken soldiers. He turned and walked slowly into the closet and Jeffrey heard the noise as they were dropped into a receptacle there. Not knowing what else to do, Wilburts walked back to his own room and, after dressing quickly, went downstairs.

Before Ronald arrived he had poured out his story to Mr. and Mrs. Frost. If his soul needed absolution, he got it from the two.

"That's just it," said Mr. Frost. "He demands these soldiers for birthdays and Christmas and God knows any other time that I can be wheedled out of a dollar or so, but the boy is so destructive with them it's endless. We can't keep up with him."

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Wilburts." Mrs. Frost also put in her oar. "I just wish you could get him away from those soldiers permanently. I sometimes think they mean more to him than his father and I do."

Thus, his conscience surfeited, Wilburts attacked his wheat cakes with vigor and did not even look up when Ronald stole in a few minutes later with a small good morning to his parents.

Despite his smugness and the disadvantage of theoretical training, Jeffrey Wilburts was not entirely lacking in sense. He realized that Ronald, who before had merely tolerated him without question or enthusiasm, now attempted to avoid him as much as possible. This would never do. The first goal for the companion or tutor is to win and hold the youngster's confidence and friendship. Both from the standpoint of his future as a teacher and tutor



and for the sake of his immediate pocketbook it would never do to alienate Ronald to the degree where the Frosts, despite their obvious liking for him, would have to look for somebody else.

Obviously, his campaign to win back Ronald's tolerance would have to be centered around the soldiers. On his day off in town Wilburts paid a visit to the toy department of a large department store where, after not a little thought, he discovered a set of khaki-clad troops, each with a sub-machine gun, and led by a nattily dressed officer with holstered revolver. Three dollars.

On his way out to the suburbs, Wilburts took the set from its wrappings and eyed the soldiers with satisfaction. Three dollars meant a good deal to Jeffrey Wilburts, but after all, he philosophized, you have to spend money in this world if you're going to get ahead. He looked closely at the soldiers and marveled casually at the care with which they were made, the uniforms and guns so precisely duplicating the real thing. The same deadpan faces, though. A faint spot of color on the cheeks and then a lifeless putty white-lead face. Jeffrey picked up the officer and scrutinized him closely. He grinned at the expressionless tiny face and then suddenly realized that the passenger sitting opposite was eyeing him amusedly.

He put his package away carefully and settled back in the day coach with a copy of "Approach to Education."

Jeffrey Wilburts' scheme worked.

"For me?" said Ronald with brightening interest as Jeffrey took the cover off the box, revealing the contents.

"Golly," and the youngster made a grab at the precious package.

The lad took the soldiers out one by one, examining them closely. His face was bright and the look he turned on Wilburts was worth three dollars and more.

"Oh, thank you, thank you so much, Mr. Wilburts. I need them so," and Ronald ran off toward his room. It seemed that Jeffrey had scored with his ward . . . but not with the Frosts.

"Now what the dickens did you go and do that for?" said Mr. Frost in an annoyed voice.

Wilburts realized that some explaining was in order. It wouldn't do to win back the boy at the cost of the parents' regard.

"I'm trying to work this problem out, Mr. Frost. This is my line of work and you've got to let me handle it in my own way. I don't want the boy to think I'm against him."

Mrs. Frost took Jeffrey's side. "I think he's right, dear. If Mr. Wilburts can get Ronald's confidence he'll be able to do more with him."

Mr. Frost harrumphed. "I think the best thing to do would be to take all those damn soldiers and chuck 'em out." He went back to his paper with an angry rumble.

"You know what Dr. Brown said, dear," Mrs. Frost reminded. "The child is emotional."

Days passed and with the gift Ronald and Jeffrey Wilburts came somewhat closer. Whatever his peculiarities, little Frost was a clever lad and Wilburts

began to see visions of himself receiving accolades as his young pupil went on to take high honors in school.

Ronald seemed to resent less Jeffry's more frequent visits to his room, and the longer time spent there. It was interesting to Wilburts that the new soldiers that he had brought to the boy weren't immediately used. Ronald put them away in the closet.

"Aren't they all right?" the tutor queried anxiously.

"Oh, sure, but they aren't quite ready yet."

"Ready for what, Ronald? I don't understand."

The young boy got an impatient tilt to his head. "You don't put troops into real battle without training, do you?" And he leveled a most scathing look at Wilburts that seemed to say "any fool should know that."

"Oh, of course," said the companion hastily.

It was a week afterward that Mr. Frost met Wilburts outside and called him over to the side of the house where the waste receptacle stood.

"Look," Frost said pointing.

Wilburts followed the direction of the pointing, and there, in among the throwouts, was a pile of broken tin soldiers—easily half a hundred of them.

"It's a disgraceful waste. I will not allow my son to grow up with such a streak of waston destruction in him," stormed Frost.

Wilburts tactfully agreed with him and said he would speak to Ronald that evening.

It was dark outside when the two, tutor and young boy, retired to the latter's room. Automatically, the lad went about his job of placing out the soldier patrols. Jeffry noticed idly that by now Ronald was using the machine gunners he had given him.

Wilburts broke the silence. "I saw a whole lot of your broken soldiers outside in the waste receptacle."

The boy showed little interest.

Wilburts went on. "That's pretty costly, you breaking them that way, Ronald. I hope you're not going to do that to the ones I gave you."

"I don't break them," Ronald turned to the tutor. "I don't break them."

"It's an expensive thing to do," went on Wilburts, ignoring the boy's denial. "Why not conserve the ones you have. Just between us, young feller, I don't think your father liked my giving you those soldiers the other day."

Ronald poled and came over toward Wilburts. "I've got to have soldiers, Mr. Wilburts. I've just got to. I need more now. Every night some get killed."

"You mean you break them," corrected Jeffry with a smile.

"I don't break them," Ronald cried. "I've told Mummy and Dad that, too."

"Well, every morning there are a few more all broken . . . how come?"

"They're dead."

"Ronald!"

"I don't break them."

"You're talking foolishness, young feller. If you don't break them, who does? And it happens at night when you're in here alone. Surely you don't think I or your parents come in here and break your soldiers, do you?"

"No."

"Well, what then?"

Ronald hung silent, then said finally, "I don't exactly know."

Jeffrey Wilburts persisted. "Now you're adding one bad habit to another. You're telling an untruth. We're not thinking of punishing you because you break your soldiers. They're yours, but we're trying to make you see that it is a dreadful waste. It makes your father very angry. You want more and more soldiers—why mother says she bought twenty-five dollars' worth of lead soldiers for your last birthday. That's a lot . . . and then you go and break them."

Ronald was nearly on the point of tears. "But I don't break them, I tell you."

"Oh Ronald," Wilburts turned away with a feigned attitude of disgust.

"They protect me!"

"The soldiers?"

"Yes, and they get killed protecting me."

"Oh," so the lad wanted to carry this fantasy further, eh. "And just what is it that kills them, Germans and Japs, I suppose! Right here!"

"No," cried Ronald. "I tell you I don't know exactly. It's something I can feel at night. It comes in here. Into this room."

"And you need the soldiers to protect you, like a bodyguard?"

"Yes," the youngster turned beseeching eyes toward the older man. "I have to have more soldiers. Please help me get them. I don't know what will happen if I can't."

That night after Ronald had gone to bed Wilburts had a long talk with the Frosts.

"It's my opinion," said Wilburts pompously, "that you ought to have your doctor look over this chap."

"Oh dear, you don't think he's coming down with anything, do you? There's been a lot of scarlet . . ."

Wilburts interrupted. "No, no, I don't mean anything like that. I mean, I think this soldier complex has gone a bit too far. . . . I think we ought to have a doctor . . ." and Jeffrey tapped his head.

"Oh," said Mrs. Frost.

"We'll get Dr. Brown," boomed Mr. Frost. "I'll call him before I leave for town tomorrow and we'll have him stop by. I think it's a good idea, Wilburts."

On his way to his room Jeffrey silently opened the door of Ronald's room and peered inside. The room was dark and from the bed came the sound of the boy's breathing, deep and regular. Certainly nothing going on now. At least sleep kept him from playing his games. As he turned softly to go, his foot almost struck a lone soldier on the floor near the door. He stooped and saw it was one of the machine gunners he had given Ronald, gun at the ready in a lifelike pose. Wilburts smiled and tiptoed into the hall.

Dr. Brown, prototype of the solid, jolly, optimistic country doctor, was in the next day in the late afternoon. He examined Ronald thoroughly and came downstairs with the opinion that "the young chap was high strung with a nervous constitution but physically he's sound . . . nothing to worry about."

After Brown had huffed and grunted his way into his great coat and de-

parted, Wilburts thought seriously about telling Mrs. Frost that the country practitioner wasn't exactly the kind of doctor he had had in mind when he'd suggested that somebody look at Ronald, but Mrs. Frost seemed so carefree since the physician's visit and verdict that he decided to put it off for a while.

And when Mr. Frost came in at night and received the news he snorted and said, "Just what I thought, there's nothing the matter with the young scawwag; he just needs to be taught some good common sense," and looked meaningfully at Jeffry Wilburts, who thereupon decided to put off delivering his opinion of Brown for good.

Time passed and Ronald's pleadings for new soldiers became incessant and frenzied.

"But it's not nearly Christmas yet, Ronald. We can't be buying you things every time you have the wish," Mrs. Frost reasoned.

"And for Christmas it's time you wanted something like boxing gloves or a fishing rod," roared Mr. Frost to his son. "No more of these soldiers, my boy. That's for children. You don't want to be like a child now you're twelve."

It was increasingly evident that night by night Ronald's troops were being thinned out, by some contrary or destructive process, reasoned Wilburts.

Late one fall evening Ronald did something unprecedented. He crept into Jeffry Wilburts' room. The tutor was moved by this visit from the boy and adopted his most friendly attitude.

"Well, hello there. Are you still walking around at this hour?"

"Mr. Wilburts, I want to talk to you, please." His eyes were downcast.

"Sure, Ronald. Go ahead," and Wilburts dropped the book he was reading and smiled in friendly fashion at the youngster.

The boy stood for a moment unsurely in the center of the floor and then looked up from his slipper toes and at Jeffry.

"It's about the soldiers," he breathed out.

Wilburts didn't say anything.

"You see how my Mummy and Dad are about it. But I thought, I thought maybe you could—would get me some more. I need them, Mr. Wilburts."

Wilburts frowned and shook his head. "You know what your family thinks about this, Ronald. You wouldn't want me to do anything behind their backs, would you?"

"It's that I don't have much more," pleaded Ronald. "After a few more nights I don't know what'll happen."

"Nonsense," expostulated Wilburts, not understanding what the boy could be going on about so. "Just stop breaking them and you'll have enough."

"I don't break them," Ronald stamped obstinately.

"All right, then, whoever does, see they don't. No, I can't get you any more, Ronald. Most likely you'll be breaking mine soon," this last petulantly with thought of his own cash outlay. "Now you'd better make tracks back off to bed."

Without another word the little boy turned and went off to bed.

The next day with Ronald off at school Jeffry took the opportunity to investigate the closet where the boy kept his precious soldiers. He noted that stock of lead soldiers was truly low. And in a metal basket at the corner of

the room were the broken parts of several dozen soldiers. It was wrong the way the boy kept breaking them. Why couldn't they be fixed up?

That night when Ronald was setting up his soldiers—all that were left unbroken—Wilburts brightly said, "The thing to do is to solder the broken parts together. Don't just chuck them out that way. How about it, Ronald?"

The boy turned toward him, "Don't you see, that doesn't do any good. When a soldier is dead, he's dead. You can't stick him together and make him a soldier again. He's just a statue."

I give up, thought Wilburts.

The next morning Jeffry found the boy picking up the usual broken and twisted soldiers. More than ever the lad's bedroom looked like the scene of a horrendous battle. The thought appealed to Wilburts. World campaigns fought on a small scale with toy soldiers! It was intriguing.

All through the day the boy moped, showing little interest in anything. Dark circles under his eyes testified to the fact that he had not slept too well. He answered solicitous queries from his mother asking how he felt with short replies.

As night approached he excused himself and went upstairs early. Mr. Frost harrumphed the whole business off. Mrs. Frost thought maybe he was coming down with something. Jeffry Wilburts, after saying good night himself, decided to go upstairs and see what was going on.

With greater care than ever before Ronald was arranging his blank-faced little soldiers—at his bed table and on the floor around his bed. Jeffry sat in the chair by the washstand and watched, ignored by young Frost.

"You haven't very many left," accused Wilburts.

"Not enough tonight, not nearly enough," replied the boy half to himself.

The preparations went on for some time and then Ronald undressed himself and got into bed. "Good night, Mr. Wilburts."

Somewhat taken aback at the lad's perfunctory attitude the tutor mumbled good night and left the room. Several hours later, in his own chamber, it deeply occurred to the half-awake Wilburts that it might be a good idea to watch the youngster for a while. And when he got up in the night to step on his soldiers in some perversion of fantasy, why Jeffry would catch him red-handed. Grabbing a large loose-leaf notepad in which to jot down anything of worth and sticking a pencil in his pocket he stole down the corridor, opened Ronald's door ever so softly and crept into the darkened room.

Ah, the chair by the washstand. That would be a fine vantage spot. The man seated himself and settled into the most comfortable position. As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, the room began to assume shape. The bedtable and the bed loomed up slowly out of the blackness. The softly breathing bundle on the bed was Ronald. His pupils enlarging to compensate for the gloom, Jeffry began to make out the little knots of soldiers, some of them his gift to Ronald, around the room. He smiled to himself. Now just wait for that little imp to get up and start to break his soldiers just as an excuse to get some new ones!

Time at night and in the dark barely exists. It is the hand of a watch slowly creeping around a luminous dial, the slow breathing of a human, the

strange night sound of soundlessness. How long Jeffrey sat there before he began to nod he did not guess or try to guess.

He drifted out of nothingness to awareness for no immediately appreciable reason. The room took a vague, unreal form before him. The window was a quartered square of faint lightness to his left. The curtains moved sluggishly in the night air—but there was something else! There was some other movement in the room. Jeffrey's hands felt numb in his lap. The white there was his open notebook. Was Ronald astir? No, he could see—yes, that must be Ronald's head there on the pillow. Suddenly Wilburts felt his eyes drawn inexorably to something moving on the floor near him.

He looked—he could move his eyes but the rest of him was seemingly paralyzed. That movement was—a soldier, soldiers! The toy soldiers were moving! All the while Wilburts clearly registered these thoughts, his mind was anesthetized with a numbness of shock or sleep—or death. It was quite impossible. All around in the dark corners small things were deploying—small lead figures, running and crouching, holding their tiny guns in readiness!

But the mind-shocking fantasy was not over—this hallucination, for that it must be, reasoned one small hindmost part of Jeffrey Wilburts' brain, was not passing.

What had awakened him, he realized now, was the Breathing. Not from the bed, not from little Ronald, but from somewhere—someone else. A breathing that was like the exhalations from the lungs of a dozen dying men, like the mournful wash of sea on an open coast, like a thousand things, all unpleasant—all inhuman or soon to be!

Then the breathing was a shadow. A shadow that was dark and made the rest of the room seem light in comparison. A blotch of preposterously shaped blackness that had no reason and no reality, except that it *was*. Slowly it was coming. From the window and the door and the ceiling and the walls . . . all at once!

Wilburts could barely move. His fingers twitched in his lap, on the sides of the notebook that lay in his lap. For the paralysis of his body, his eyes tried to make up. For they were darting everywhere. Jeffrey looked at the bed and there was Ronald sitting up, his eyes white discs of blank, stark fear.

Great activity was taking place on the floor around the bed. Suddenly a tiny flash, followed by others in rapid succession, from different sections of the room, attracted the tutor's eye. The soldiers were fighting back!

But whatever it was they were fighting was still coming. A breathing, panting noise of a thing. Nameless, descriptionless except for the grotesque shadow it threw. The soldiers were scattering as the shadow darkened and grew in intensity around the bed. Jeffrey saw that one after another the toy guards were going down. The flashes of firing were growing less frequent. Still the noises in the room were the distant, indistinct but recognizable noises of battle heard from afar—and all the time the heavy, slobbery breathing grew in volume until its wheezing inhalations were like a giant bellows half-full of unhealthy water.

But the crowning blow of terror came to Jeffrey Wilburts when he felt a tug and pulling on his trousers and suddenly, as he looked down, a tiny figure pulled itself desperately into his lap. That part of Wilburts' mind still functioning in a semi-rational manner dimly recognized the tin soldier as the officer of the ones he had given to Ronald.

But now the officer, standing on Wilburts' open notebook, had his revolver out of his holster and was shooting toward the center of the room—shooting upward, upward where something black was hovering over the bed upon which a little boy sat and stared with the gaze of one who cannot see beyond the inside of his eyes.

The breathing sound was deafening and suffocating. The air was filled with a dampness, a vibration that was maddening, the armed resistance from the floor and bedtable had ceased. The monster—whatever it was—had won. Jeffrey wished himself awake and with a terrific effort of will forced his hands upward. He pushed his notebook shut and drove himself up and toward the door. He had no memory of opening it and stepping out into the hall, or of getting into his own bed, throwing the notebook into his bag and falling on his bed.

The next morning Ronald didn't come down to breakfast. Wilburts, although he had a memory of a very bad dream, attached no significance to this—that was until Mrs. Frost went upstairs and let out a scream for the others. Jeffrey and Mr. Frost ran up the stairs. Ronald was sitting up in bed grinning at them strangely. Briefly, Wilburts' attention went to the floor. Everywhere were the soldiers—every one broken. Another pitiful cry came from Mrs. Frost as the two men rushed closer. It was frightfully obvious. The boy was utterly mad; he had turned into a complete, raving idiot in the night!

As he rode toward the city Jeffrey Wilburts thought unpleasantly of that last day at the Frosts. He remembered the strange sawing noises the boy had made, the drooling from the mouth, Dr. Brown's visit and the call for specialists. He shuddered. It was most unpleasant. And most of all the remembrance of his own terrifying dream. But he did remember planning to go down to Ronald's room and sit there for a while to see what would go on. Yes, of course, he'd even take a notetook to report anything of significance.

On inspiration Jeffrey reached into his bag and brought forth the large loose-leaf book.

As he pulled it onto his lap he noticed the bulge. He flipped open the pages and caught the object as it fell out.

It was the toy soldier-officer! Wilburts wet his lips and his head pounded.

The one that had come with the soldiers he had given Ronald not so many weeks ago. The one that had crawled upon his lap and onto the notebook in his dreadful dream last night!

Wilburts' mind worked slowly over the details, chewing each fact slowly while his face tingled and dampened.

He brought the soldier closer, much closer to his face. Wilburts' fingers trembled. It was all quite impossible!

The tiny lead face should be a blob of expressionless putty and paint. But it wasn't.

Instead the toy soldier's countenance was frozen in a grimace of unspeakable horror—rivaled only by the face of the man so near its own!



# The Still Small Voice

by Clive G. B. Jackson

*It is unusual for the AVON FANTASY READER to buy an original these days, and even more unusual to buy an original by an author who, as far as we know, never made a sale before. We saw this little gem in a small privately printed fan magazine from Northern Ireland. The author is, we understand, a young Scotman and we do not know if he intends taking up writing as a career. If he did, we would say that he was the first successful disciple of the Ray Bradbury school. The touch is there in these few hundred words that reflect the Bradbury sense of the unexpected.*

“W

ELL, it's like we made it, Young Jim.”

“Yes, Dad, it looks like we did it.”

“My, will you look at that! All that water, and why d'you suppose it's so green?”

“Yes, I wonder why? So they were canals, after all. Straight as a die, as far as you can see. My!”

“Well, Young Jim. Better get busy on that air analysis, and then we can stretch our legs awhile.”

Father and son stood in the airlock, side by side, on the threshold of a strange new world, and it was such an awesome feeling that neither of them said anything at all, and then together they stepped forward out of the ship onto the strange new soil.

When they were outside, the tension broke, and they both laughed a little without knowing why, and the boy knelt suddenly and said, “Look, Dad, see what makes everything so red. Such a tiny, beautiful little plant and hardly any roots at all.” And the father said, “Say, just look at these leaves; they must have a million points, and each one perfect as a snowflake.”

Then they remembered that they had a ceremony to perform, so they got out the big green UNO flag on its aluminium pole, and the small shiny camera on its tripod, and the boy took a picture of his father, and the father took one of his son, and then they both stood by the flag while the automatic shutter whurred and clicked. They looked very self-conscious, and the father said, “By gosh, I never felt so many kinds of a darn' fool in all my life!”

After that, they went for a little walk, not far, because the sun was already almost on the horizon, and while it was setting they came back and had their

first meal on the new world. They opened some cans of beer they had brought especially for the occasion, and the father made a little speech to their imaginary hosts, and they both laughed a great deal. They even sang a little, and the boy played on an old out-of-tune harmonica, but the more noise they made the quieter it seemed to be. The sound rolled away and was lost in the solemn silence of the ageless plains, and soon they grew quiet and sat still smoking their pipes while the warm night fell around them and the stars came out one by one like fireflies settling on a velvet cloak.

The days that followed were long and very full. They took samples of the soil and rocks, and preserved some of the tiny red flowers and transplanted some into boxes, and analysed the canal water, and made slides of some of the strange algae that made it so green, and took a great many photographs. They made weather observations, but their barometers never varied by a millibar, and their rain gauge was always empty, and they tramped many miles with pack and compass, but they never found anything at all except the little red plants and the green algae.

One evening, when they were sitting smoking their pipes and looking at the familiar stars, the son said suddenly, "We will leave tomorrow morning" in such a matter-of-fact tone that he might have said "We will have beans for breakfast tomorrow morning."

His father looked at him, with his pipe half way to his mouth, and said, "Oh, I know it's been a mite disappointing so far, Young Jim, but there's lots of directions we haven't tried yet, and maybe this is just a calm season, and anyway if we go back so soon the Assembly will say we haven't done our job properly." And the son knocked out his pipe and stood up and said, "We will leave in the morning." Then he went to bed.

The father was so hurt that he could hardly believe his ears, because his son had never spoken to him in that way before, and he sat very still for a long time until his pipe grew cold in his hand, and then he went slowly inside the ship to his son because he could hear him weeping.

He came to the boy's bunk without switching on any lights, and he laid his hand on the trembling shoulder and said, very gently, "Forget it, Young Jim. This goddam' red world is enough to make anyone edgy, and sure we'll leave in the morning if you want."

"Oh, Dad it . . . wasn't me!"

"Huh? How's that again, son?"

"It wasn't me that said that about leaving, it was . . . someone else, and he's got inside somehow, inside my head, and I'm scared." The boy snapped on the lights, and then the father saw the naked terror that stared at him from his son's young eyes, and the force of it hit him like a jet of ice-cold water, and he knew there was nothing he could say because they were not alone any more.

In the morning, after they had begun to pack their gear, the boy said, "We can't go, Dad, not back there. Sometimes he asks me questions, about what's it like there, and how do people behave, and what is love, and what is death, and I just know something terrible will come if we go back . . . if we take him back."

The father stood up and squared his shoulders and said, "Yes, Young Jim, we must stay and fight it here, and maybe if—when he comes back again—you tell me, then maybe I can put my mind alongside of yours and help you to resist him." He gripped his son's shoulders tightly. "We've got to fight him, son, we've just got to!"

So they started to unpack the equipment again, until suddenly the boy said, without emotion, "You will prepare the ship for flight," and the gun in his hand was trained steadily as a rock on his father's heart, and there could be no doubt at all that he would use it.

The father looked at his son and said, "Yes," almost in a whisper, and he could not say anything else because of the gun and because of the grief that tore at his heart as he realized that he had lost his son.

He moved heavily towards the air lock, and then he leaped like an uncoiled spring and bore the boy to the ground, and the flat report of the gun echoed away over the endless red plains.

After a moment he climbed shakily to his feet and stood looking down at his son with the tears rolling down his cheeks, and then he stooped and gently drew the harmonica from the vest pocket. It was twisted with the force of the explosion and riven by the bullet, and it was the one he had bought Young Jim five . . . no, six years ago when he was at Cal. Tech, and the one on which his son had played "Sweet Adeline" the first evening after they had landed.

And then he forgot about the harmonica, because, although no sound broke the terrible silence, somebody said, quite distinctly, "Now prepare your machine for departure."

# The Curse of Yig

by Zealia Brown Bishop

*H. P. Lovecraft, a great writer of horror stories in his own right, used to supplement his limited income by assisting others in their literary endeavors. Sometimes by criticism, sometimes by collaboration or revision. Among those who benefited by his advice at the dawn of their careers were such well-known persons as August Derleth, Robert Bloch, Donald Wandrei, and Frank Belknap Long. One of his most startling and different assists, an example of revision and collaboration, is this fright-compelling story of the God of Snakes. If you cannot stand the thought of snakes, don't read this story. If you have nightmares after reading Zealia Bishop's minor classic, don't say you weren't warned.*

IN 1925 I went into Oklahoma looking for snake lore, and I came out with a fear of snakes that will last me the rest of my life. I admit it is foolish, since there are natural explanations for everything I saw and heard, but it masters me none the less. If the old story had been all there was to it, I would not have been so badly shaken. My work as an American Indian ethnologist has hardened me to all kinds of extravagant legendry, and I know that simple white people can bear the redskins at their own game when it comes to fanciful inventions. But I can't forget what I saw with my own eyes at the insane asylum in Guthrie.

I called at that asylum because a few of the oldest settlers told me I would find something important there. Neither Indians nor white men would discuss the snake-god legends I had come to trace. The oil-boom newcomers, of course, knew nothing of such matters, and the red men and old pioneers were plainly frightened when I spoke of them. Not more than six or seven people mentioned the asylum, and those who did were careful to talk in whispers. But the whisperers said that Dr. McNeill could show me a very terrible relic and tell me all I wanted to know. He could explain why Yig, the half-human father of serpents, is a shunned and feared object in central Oklahoma, and why old settlers shiver at the secret Indian orgies which make the autumn days and nights hideous with the ceaseless beating of tom-toms in lonely places.

It was with the scent of a hound on the trail that I went to Guthrie, for I had spent many years collecting data on the evolution of serpent-worship among the Indians. I had always felt, from well-defined undertones of legend

and archeology, that great Quetzalcoatl—benign snake-god of the Mexicans—had had an older and darker prototype; and during recent months I had well-nigh proved it in a series of researches stretching from Guatemala to the Oklahoma plains. But everything was tantalizing and incomplete, for above the border the cult of the snake was hedged about by fear and furtiveness.

Now it appeared that a new and copious source of data was about to dawn, and I sought the head of the asylum with an eagerness I did not try to cloak. Doctor McNeill was a small clean-shaven man of somewhat advanced years, and I saw at once from his speech and manner that he was a scholar of no mean attainments in many branches outside his profession. Grave and doubtful when I first made known my errand, his face grew thoughtful as he carefully scanned my credentials and the letter of introduction which a kindly old ex-Indian agent had given me.

"So you've been studying the Yig-legend, eh?" he reflected sententially. "I know that many of our Oklahoma ethnologists have tried to connect it with Quetzalcoatl, but I don't think any of them have traced the intermediate steps so well. You've done remarkable work for a man as young as you seem to be, and you certainly deserve all the data we can give.

"I don't suppose old Major Moore or any of the others told you what it is I have here. They don't like to talk about it, and neither do I. It is very tragic and very horrible, but that is all. I refuse to consider it anything supernatural. There's a story about it that I'll tell you after you see it—a devilish sad story, but one that I won't call magic. It merely shows the potency that belief has over some people. I'll admit there are times when I feel a shiver that's more than physical, but in daylight I set all that down to nerves. I'm not a young fellow any more, alas!

"To come to the point, the thing I have is what you might call a victim of Yig's curse—a physically living victim. We don't let the bulk of the nurses see it, although most of them know it's here. There are just two steady old chaps whom I let feed it and clean out its quarters—used to be three, but good old Stevens passed on a few years ago. I suppose I'll have to break in a new group pretty soon; for the thing does not seem to age or change much, and we old boys can't last forever. Maybe the ethics of the near future will let us give it a merciless release, but it's hard to tell.

"Did you see that single ground-glass basement window over in the east wing when you came up the drive? That's where it is. I'll take you there myself now. You needn't make any comment. Just look through the movable panel in the door and thank God the light isn't any stronger. Then I'll tell you the story—or as much as I've been able to piece together."

We walked downstairs very quietly, and did not talk as we threaded the corridors of the seemingly deserted basement. Doctor McNeill unlocked a gray-painted steel door, but it was only a bulkhead leading to a further stretch of hallway. At length he paused before a door marked B 116, opened a small observation panel which he could use only by standing on tiptoe, and pounded several times upon the painted metal, as if to arouse the occupant, whatever it might be.

A faint stench came from the aperture as the doctor unclosed it, and I

fancied his pounding elicited a kind of low, hissing response. Finally he motioned me to replace him at the peephole, and I did so with a causeless and increasing tremor. The barred, ground-glass window, close to the earth outside, admitted only a feeble and uncertain pallor; and I had to look into the malodorous den for several seconds before I could see what was crawling and wriggling about on the straw-covered floor, emitting every now and then a weak and vacuous hiss. Then the shadowed outlines began to take shape, and I perceived that the squirming entity bore some remote resemblance to a human form laid flat on its belly. I clutched at the door handle for support as I tried to keep from fainting.

The moving object was almost of human size, and entirely devoid of clothing. It was absolutely hairless, and its tawny-looking back seemed subely squamous in the dim, ghoulish light.

Around the shoulders it was rather speckled and brownish, and the head was very curiously flat. As it looked up to hiss at me I saw that the beady little black eyes were damnable anthropoloid, but I could not bear to study them long. They fastened themselves on me with a horrible persistence, so that I closed the panel gaspingly and left the creature to wriggle about unseen in its matted straw and spectral twilight. I must have reeled a bit, for I saw that the doctor was gently holding my arm as he guided me away. I was stuttering over and over again: "But for God's sake, *what is it?*"

Doctor McNeill told me the story in his private office as I sprawled opposite him in an easy-chair. The gold and crimson of late afternoon changed to the violet of early dusk, but still I sat awed and motionless. I resented every ring of the telephone and every whirr of the buzzer, and I could have cursed the nurses and internes whose knocks now and then summoned the doctor briefly to the outer office. Night came, and I was glad my host switched on all the lights. Scientist though I was, my zeal for research was hilt forgotten amid such breathless ecstasies of fright as a small boy might feel when whispered witch-tales go the rounds of the chimney-corner.

It seems that Yig, the snake god of the central plains tribes—presumably the primal source of the more southerly Quetzacoatl or Kukulcan—was an odd, half-anthropomorphic devil of highly arbitrary and capricious nature. He was not wholly evil, and was usually quite well disposed toward those who gave proper respect to him and his children, the serpents; but in the autumn he became abnormally ravenous and had to be driven away by means of suitable rites. That was why the tom-toms in the Pawnee, Wichita, and Caddo country pounded ceaselessly week in and week out in August, September, and October; and why the medicine men made strange noises with rattles and whistles curiously like those of the Aztecs and Mayas.

Yig's chief trait was a relentless devotion to his children—a devotion so great that the redskins almost feared to protect themselves from the venomous rattlesnakes which thronged the region. Frightful clandestine tales hinted of his vengeance upon mortals who floated him or wreaked harm upon his wriggling progeny, his chosen method being to turn his victim, after suitable torture, to a spotted snake.

In the old days of the Indian Territory, the doctor went on, there was not

quite so much secrecy about Yig. The plains tribes, less cautious than the desert nomads and Pueblos, talked quite freely of their legends and autumn ceremonies with the first Indian agents, and let considerable of the lore spread out through the neighboring regions of white settlement. The great fear came in the land-rush days of 'eighty-nine, when some extraordinary incidents had been rumored, and the rumors sustained, by what seemed to be hideously tangible proofs. Indians said that the new white men did not know how to get on with Yig, and afterward the settlers came to take that theory at face value. Now no old-timer in middle Oklahoma, white or red, could be induced to breathe a word about the snake-god except in vague hints. Yet after all, the doctor added with almost needless emphasis, the only truly authenticated horror had been a thing of pitiful tragedy rather than of bewitchment. It was all very material and cruel—even that last phase which had caused so much dispute.

Doctor McNeill paused and cleared his throat before getting down to his special story, and I felt a tingling sensation as when a theatre curtain rises. The thing had begun when Walker Davis and his wife Audrey left Arkansas to settle in the newly opened public lands in the spring of 1889, and the end had come in the country of the Wichitas—north of the Wichita River, in what is at present Caddo County. There is a small village called Binger there now, and the railway goes through; but otherwise the place is less changed than other parts of Oklahoma. It is still a section of farms and ranches—quite productive in these days—since the great oil-fields do not come very close.

Walker and Audrey had come from Franklin County in the Ozarks with a canvas-topped wagon, two mules, an ancient and useless dog called Wolf, and all their household goods. They were typical hill-folk, youngish and perhaps a little more ambitious than most, and looked forward to a life of better returns for their hard work than they had had in Arkansas. Both were lean, raw-boned specimens; the man tall, sandy, and gray-eyed, and the woman short and rather dark, with a black straightness of hair suggesting a slight Indian admixture.

In general, there was very little of distinction about them, and but for one thing their annals might not have differed from those of thousands of other pioneers who flocked into the new country at that time. That thing was Walker's almost epileptic fear of snakes, which some laid to prenatal causes, and some said came from a dark prophecy about his end with which an old Indian squaw had tried to scare him when he was small. Whatever the cause, the effect was marked indeed; for despite his strong general courage the very mention of a snake would cause him to grow faint and pale, while the sight of even a tiny specimen would produce a shock sometimes bordering on a convulsion seizure.

The Davises started out early in the year, in the hope of being on their new land for the spring plowing. Travel was slow; for the roads were bad in Arkansas, while in the Territory there were great stretches of rolling hills and red, sandy barrens without any roads whatever. As the terrain grew flatter, the change from their native mountains depressed them more, perhaps, than they realized, but they found the people at the Indian agencies very

affable, while most of the settled Indians seemed friendly and civil. Now and then they encountered a fellow-pioneer, with whom crude pleasantries and expressions of amiable rivalry were generally exchanged.

Owing to the season, there were not many snakes in evidence, so Walker did not suffer from his special temperamental weakness. In the earlier stages of the journey, too, there were no Indian snake legends to trouble him; for the transplanted tribes from the southeast do not share the wilder beliefs of their western neighbors. As fate would have it, it was a white man at Okmulgee in the Creek country who gave the Davises the first hint of the Yag beliefs; a hint which had a curiously fascinating effect on Walker, and caused him to ask questions very freely after that.

Before long Walker's fascination had developed into a bad case of fright. He took the most extraordinary precautions at each of the nightly camps, always clearing away whatever vegetation he found, and avoiding stony places whenever he could. Every clump of stunted bushes and every cleft in the great, slab-like rocks seemed to him now to hide malevolent serpents, while every human figure not obviously part of a settlement or emigrant train seemed to him a potential snake-god till nearness had proved the contrary. Fortunately no troublesome encounters came at this stage to shake his nerves still further.

As they approached the Kickapoo country they found it harder and harder to avoid camping near rocks. Finally it was no longer possible, and poor Walker was reduced to the puerile expedient of dousing some of the rustic anti-snake charms he had learned in his boyhood. Two or three times a snake was really glimpsed, and these sights did not help the sufferer in his efforts to preserve composure.

On the twenty-second evening of the journey a savage wind made it imperative, for the sake of the mules, to camp in as sheltered a spot as possible; and Audrey persuaded her husband to take advantage of a cliff which rose uncommonly high above the dried bed of a former tributary of the Canadian River. He did not like the rocky east of the place, but allowed himself to be overruled this once; leading the animals sullenly toward the protesting slope, which the nature of the ground would not allow the wagon to approach.

Audrey, examining the rocks near the wagon, meanwhile noticed a singular sniffing on the part of the feeble old dog. Seizing a rifle, she followed his lead, and presently thanked her stars that she had forestalled Walker in her discovery. For there, snugly nested in the gap between two boulders, was a sight it would have done him no good to see. Visible only as one convoluted expanse, but perhaps comprising as many as three or four separate units, was a mass of lazy wriggling which could not be other than a brood of newborn rattlesnakes.

Anxious to save Walker from a trying shock, Audrey did not hesitate to act, but took the gun firmly by the barrel and brought the butt down again and again upon the writhing objects. Her own sense of loathing was great, but it did not amount to a real fear. Finally she saw that her task was done, and turned to cleanse the improvised bludgson in the red sand and dry, dead grass near by. She must, she reflected, cover the nest up before Walker got



back from tethering the mules. Old Wolf, towering relic of mixed shepherd and coyote ancestry that he was, had vanished, and she feared he had gone to fetch his master.

Footsteps at that instant proved her fear well founded. A second moose, and Walker had seen everything. Audrey made a move to catch him if he should faint, but he did no more than sway. Then the look of pure fright on his bloodless face turned slowly to something like mingled awe and anger, and he began to upbraid his wife in trembling tones.

"Gawd's sake, Aud, but why'd ye go for to do that? Hain't ye heerd all the things they've ben tellin' about this snake-devil Yig? Ye'd ought to a told me, and we'd a moved on. Don't ye know they's a devil-god what gets even if ye hurts his children? What for d'ye think the Injuns all dances and beats their drums in the fall about? This land's under a curse, I can tell ye—nigh every soul we've a-talked to sence we come in's said the same. Yig rules here, an' he comes out every fall for to git his victims and turn 'em into snakes. Why, Aud, they won't none of them Injuns across the Canayjin kill a snake for love nor money!

"Gawd knows what ye done to yourself, gal, a-stompin' out a hull brood o' Yig's chillen. He'll git ye, sure, sooner or later, unlessen I kin buy a charm offen some o' the Injun medicine-men. He'll git ye, Aud, as sure's they's a Gawd in heaven—he'll come out the night and turn ye into a crawlin' spotted snake!"

All the rest of the journey Walker kept up the frightened reproofs and prophecies. They crossed the Canadian near Newcastle, and soon afterward met with the first of the real plains Indians they had seen—a party of blanketed Wichitas, whose leader talked freely under the spell of the whiskey offered him, and taught poor Walker a long-winded protective charm against Yig in exchange for a quart bottle of the same inspiring fluid. By the end of the week the chosen site in the Wichita country was reached, and the Davises made haste to trace their boundaries and perform the spring plowing before even beginning the construction of a cabin.

The region was flat, dreadfully windy, and sparse of natural vegetation, but promised great fertility under cultivation. Occasional outcroppings of granite diversified a soil of decomposed red sandstone, and here and there a great flat rock would stretch along the surface of the ground like a man-made floor. There seemed to be very few snakes, or possible dens for them; so Audrey at last persuaded Walker to build the one-room cabin over a vast, smooth slab of exposed stone. With such a flooring and with a good-sized fireplace the wettest weather might be defied—though it soon became evident that dampness was no salient quality of the district. Logs were hauled in the wagon from the nearest belt of woods, many miles toward the Wichita Mountains.

Walker built his wide-chimneyed cabin and crude barn with the aid of the other settlers, though the nearest one was over a mile away. In turn, he helped his helpers at similar house-raisings, so that many ties of friendship sprang up between the new neighbors. There was no town worthy the name nearer than El Reno, on the railway thirty miles or more to the northeast; and be-

fore many weeks had passed, the people of the section had become very cohesive despite the wideness of their scattering. The Indians, a few of whom had begun to settle down on ranches, were for the most part harmless, though somewhat quarrelsome when fired by the liquid stimulation which found its way to them despite all Government bans.

Of all the neighbors the Davises found Joe and Sally Compton, who likewise hailed from Arkansas, the most helpful and congenial. Sally is still alive, known now as Grandma Compton; and her son Clyde, then an infant in arms, has become one of the leading men of the State. Sally and Audrey used to visit each other often, for their cabins were only two miles apart; and in the long spring and summer afternoons they exchanged many a tale of old Arkansas and many a rumor about the new country.

Sally was very sympathetic about Walker's weakness regarding snakes, but perhaps did more to aggravate than cure the parallel nervousness which Audrey was acquiring through his incessant praying and prophesying about the curse of Yig. She was uncommonly full of gruesome snake stories, and produced a direfully strong impression with her acknowledged masterpiece—the tale of a man in Scott County who had been bitten by a whole horde of rattlers at once, and had swelled so monstrously from poison that his body had finally burst with a pop. Needless to say, Audrey did not repeat this anecdote to her husband, and she implored the Comptons to beware of starting it on the rounds of the countryside. It is to Joe's and Sally's credit that they heeded this plea with the utmost fidelity.

Walker did his corn-planting early, and in midsummer improved his time by harvesting a fair crop of the native grass of the region. With the help of Joe Compton he dug a well which gave a moderate supply of very good water, though he planned to sink an artesian later on. He did not run into many serious snake scares, and made his land as inhospitable as possible for wriggling visitors. Every now and then he rode over to the cluster of thatched, conical huts which formed the main village of the Wichitas, and talked long with the old men and shamans about the snake god and how to nullify his wrath. Charms were always ready in exchange for whisky, but much of the information he got was far from reassuring.

Yig was a great god. He was bad medicine. He did not forget things. In the autumn his children were hungry and wild, and Yig was hungry and wild, too. All the tribes made medicine against Yig when the corn harvest came. They gave him some corn, and danced in proper regalia to the sound of whistle, rattle, and drum. They kept the drums pounding to drive Yig away, and called down the aid of Tiriwa, whose children men are, even as the snakes are Yig's children. It was bad that the squaw of Davis killed the children of Yig. Let Davis say the charms many times when the corn harvest comes. Yig is Yig. Yig is a great god.

By the time the corn harvest did come, Walker had succeeded in getting his wife into a deplorably jumpy state. His prayers and borrowed incantations came to be a nuisance; and when the autumn rites of the Indians began, there was always a distant wind-borne pounding of tom-toms to<sup>1</sup> and an added background of the sinister. It was maddening to have the

clatter always stealing over the wide, red plains. Why would it never stop? Day and night, week on week, it was always going in exhaustless relays, as persistently as the red dusty winds that carried it. Audrey loathed it more than her husband did, for he saw in it a compensating element of protection. It was with this sense of a mighty, intangible bulwark against evil that he got in his corn crop and prepared cabin and stable for the coming winter.

The autumn was abnormally warm, and except for their primitive cookery the Davises found scant use for the stone fireplace Walker had built with such care. Something in the unnaturalness of the hot dust-clouds preyed on the nerves of all the settlers, but most of all on Audrey's and Walker's. The notions of a hovering snake curse and the weird, endless rhythm of the distant Indian drums turned a bad combination which any added element of the bizarre went far to render utterly unendurable.

Notwithstanding this strain, several festive gatherings were held at one or another of the cabins after the crops were reaped: keeping naively alive in modernity those curious rites of the harvest-home which are as old as human agriculture itself. Lafayette Smith, who came from southern Missouri and had a cabin about three miles east of Walker's, was a very passable fiddler; and his tunes did much to make the celebrants forget the monotonous beating of the distant tom-toms. Then Hallowe'en drew near, and the settlers planned another frolic—this time, had they but known it, of a lineage older than even agriculture: the dread Witch-Sabbath of the primal pre-Aryans, kept alive through ages in the midnight blackness of secret woods, and still hinting at vague terrors under its latter-day mask of comedy and lightness. Hallowe'en was to fall on a Thursday, and the neighbors agreed to gather for their first revel at the Davis cabin.

It was on that thirty-first day of October that the warm spell broke. The morning was gray and leaden, and by noon the incessant winds had changed from seariness to rawness. People shivered all the more because they were not prepared for the chill, and Walker Davis's old dog, Wolf, dragged himself wearily indoors to a place beside the hearth. But the distant drums still thumped on, nor were the white citizenry less inclined to pursue their chosen rites. As early as four in the afternoon the wagons began to arrive at Walker's cabin; and in the evening, after a memorable barbecue, Lafayette Smith's fiddle inspired a very fair-sized company to great feats of salutory grotesqueness in the one good-sized but crowded room. The younger folk indulged in the amiable inanities proper to the season, and now and then old Wolf would howl with doleful and spine-tickling ominousness at some especially spectral strain from Lafayette's squeaky violin—a device he had never heard before. Mostly, though, this battered veteran slept through the merriment, for he was past the age of active interests and lived largely in his dreams. Tom and Jennie Rigby had brought their collie Zeke along, but the canines did not fraternize. Zeke seemed strangely uneasy over something, and nosed around curiously all the evening.

Audrey and Walker made a fine couple on the floor, and Grandma Compson still likes to recall her impression of their dancing that night. Their worries seemed forgotten for the nonce, and Walker was shaved and trimmed

into a surprising degree of spruceness. By ten o'clock all hands were healthily tired, and the guests began to depart family by family with many handshakings and bluff assurances of what a fine time everybody had had. Tom and Jennie thought Zeke's cory howls as he followed them to their wagon were marks of regret at having to go home; though Audrey said it must be the far-away tom-toms which annoyed him, for the distant thumping was surely ghastly enough after the merriment within.

The night was bitterly cold, and for the first time Walker put a great log in the fireplace and banked it with ashes to keep it smoldering till morning. Old Wolf dragged himself within the ruddy glow and lapsed into his customary coma. Audrey and Walker, too tired to think of charms or curses, tumbled into the rough pine bed and were asleep before the cheap alarm-clock on the mantel had ticked out three minutes. And from far away, the rhythmic pounding of those hellish tom-toms still pulsed on the chill night wind.

Doctor McNeill paused here and removed his glasses, as if a blurring of the objective world might make the reminiscent vision clearer.

"You'll soon appreciate," he said, "that I had a great deal of difficulty in piecing out all that happened after the guests left. There were times, though—at first—when I was able to make a try at it." After a moment of silence he went on with the tale.

Audrey had terrible dreams of Yig, who appeared to her in the guise of Satan as depicted in cheap engravings she had seen. It was, indeed, from an absolute ecstasy of nightmare that she started suddenly awake to find Walker already conscious and sitting up in bed. He seemed to be listening intently to something, and silenced her with a whisper when she began to ask what had aroused him.

"Hark, Aud!" he breathed. "Don't ye hear somethin' a-singin' and buzzin' and rustlin'? D'ye reckon it's the fall crickets?"

Certainly, there was distinctly audible within the cabin such a sound as he had described. Audrey tried to analyze it, and was impressed with some element at once horrible and familiar, which hovered just outside the rim of her memory. And beyond it all, waking a hideous thought, the monotonous beating of the distant tom-toms came incessantly across the black plains on which a cloudy half moon had set.

"Walker—s'pose it's—the—the—curse o' Yig?"

She could feel him tremble.

"No, gal, I don't reckon he comes that way. He's shapen like a man, except ye look at him clost. That's what Chief Gray Eagle says. This here's some varmints come in outen the cold—not crickets, I calc'late, but summat like 'em. I orter git up and stomp 'em out afore they make much headway or git at the cupboard."

He rose, felt for the lantern that hung within easy reach, and rattled the tin match-box nailed to the wall beside it. Audrey sat up in bed and watched the flare of the match grow into the steady glow of the lantern. Then, as their eyes began to take in the whole of the room, the crude rafters shook with the frenzy of their simultaneous shriek. For the flat, rocky floor, revealed in the new-born illumination, was one seething, brown-speckled

mass of wriggling rattlesnakes, slithering toward the fire, and even now turning their loathsome heads to menace the fright-blinded lantern-bearer.

It was only for an instant that Audrey saw the things. The reptiles were of every size, of uncountable numbers, and apparently of several varieties; and even as she looked, two or three of them reared their heads as if to strike at Walker. She did not faint—it was Walker's crash to the floor that extinguished the lantern and plunged her into blackness. He had not screamed a second time—fright had paralyzed him, and he fell as if shot by a silent arrow from no mortal's bow. To Audrey the entire world seemed to whirl about fantastically, mingling with the nightmare from which she had started.

Voluntary motion of any sort was impossible, for will and the sense of reality had left her. She fell back inertly on her pillow, hoping that she would wake soon. No actual sense of what had happened penetrated her mind for some time. Then, little by little, the suspicion that she was really awake began to dawn on her; and she was convulsed with a mounting blend of panic and grief which made her long to shriek out despite the inhibiting spell which kept her mute.

Walker was gone, and she had not been able to help him. He had died of snakes, just as the old witch-woman had predicted when he was a little boy. Poor Wolf had not been able to help either—probably he had not even awakened from his senile stupor. And now the crawling things must be coming for her, writhing closer and closer every moment in the dark, perhaps even now twining slipperily about the bedposts and oozing up over the coarse woollen blankets. Unconsciously she crept under the clothes and trembled.

It must be the curse of Yig. He had sent his monstrous children on All-Hallows' Night, and they had taken Walker first. Why was that—wasn't he innocent enough? Why not come straight for her—hadn't she killed those little rattlers alone? Then she thought of the curse's form as told by the Indians. She wouldn't be killed—just turned to a spotted snake. Ugh! So she would be like those things she had glimpsed on the floor—those things which Yig had sent to get her and enroll her among their number! She tried to mumble a charm that Walker had taught her, but found she could not utter a single sound.

The noisy ticking of the alarm-clock sounded above the maddening beat of the distant tom-toms. The snakes were taking a long time—did they mean to delay on purpose to play on her nerves? Every now and then she thought she felt a steady, insidious pressure on the bedclothes, but each time it turned out to be only the automatic twitchings of her over-wrought nerves. The clock ticked on in the dark, and a change came slowly over her thoughts.

Those snakes *couldn't* have taken so long! They couldn't be Yig's messengers after all, but just natural rattlers that were nested below the rock and had been drawn there by the fire. They weren't coming for her, perhaps—perhaps they had sated themselves on poor Walker. Where were they now? Gone? Coiled by the fire? Still crawling over the prone corpse of their victim? The clock ticked, and the distant drums throbbed on.

At the thought of her husband's body lying there in the pitch blackness a

thrill of purely physical horror passed over Audrey. That story of Sally Compton's about the man back in Scott County! He, too, had been bitten by a whole bunch of rattlesnakes, and what had happened to him? The poison had rotted the flesh and swelled the whole corpse, and in the end the bloated thing had *burst* horribly—burst horribly with a detestable *popping* noise. Was that what was happening to Walker down there on the rock floor? Instinctively she felt that she had begun to *listen* for something too terrible even to name to herself.

The clock ticked on, keeping a kind of mocking, sardonic tune with the far off drumming that the night wind brought. She wished it were a striking clock, so that she could know how long this eldritch vigil must last. She cursed the toughness of fiber that kept her from fainting, and wondered what sort of relief the dawn could bring, after all. Probably neighbors would pass—no doubt somebody would call—would they find her still sane? Was she still sane now?

Morbidly listening, Audrey all at once became aware of something which she had to verify with every effort of her will before she could believe it; and which, once verified, she did not know whether to welcome or dread. *The distant beating of the Indian tom-toms had ceased.*

She did not relish this new and sudden silence, after all! There was something sinister about it. The loud-ticking clock seemed abnormal in its new loneliness. Capable at last of conscious motion, she shook the covers from her face and looked into the darkness toward the window. It must have cleared after the moon set, for she saw the square aperture distinctly against the background of stars.

Then without warning came that shocking, unutterable sound—ugh!—that dull *pop* of cleft skin and escaping poison in the dark. God!—The bonds of muteness snapped, and the black night waved reverberant with Audrey's screams of stark, unbridled frenzy.

Consciousness did not pass away with the shock. How merciful if only it had! Amidst the echoes of her shrieking Audrey still saw the star-sprinkled square of window ahead, and heard the doom-lading ticking of that frightful clock. Did she hear another sound? Was that square window still a perfect square? She was in no condition to weigh the evidence of her senses or distinguish between fact and hallucination.

No—that window was *not* a perfect square. *Something had encroached on the lower edge.* Nor was the ticking of the clock the only sound in the room. There was, beyond dispute, a heavy breathing neither her own nor poor Wolf's. Wolf slept very silently, and his wakeful wheezing was unmistakable. Then Audrey saw against the stars the black, demonic silhouette of something anthropoid—the undulant bulk of a gigantic head and shoulders tumbling slowly toward her.

"Yaaaah! Yaaaah! Go away! Go away! Go away, snake devil! Go 'way, Yig! I didn't mean to kill 'em—I was scared he'd be scairt of 'em. Don't, Yig, don't! I didn't go for to hurt yore chillen—don't come nigh me—don't change me into no spotted snake!"

But the half-formless head and shoulders only lurched onward toward the bed, very silently.

Everything snapped at once inside Audrey's head, and in a second she had turned from a cowering child to a raging madwoman. She knew where the ax was—hung against the wall on those pegs near the lantern. It was within easy reach, and she could find it in the dark. Before she was conscious of anything further it was in her hands, and she was creeping toward the foot of the bed—toward the monstrous head and shoulders that every moment groped their way nearer. Had there been any light, the look on her face would not have been pleasant to see.

"Take *that*, you! And *that*, and *that*, and *that*!"

She was laughing shrilly now, and her cackles mounted higher as she saw that the starlight beyond the window was yielding to the dim prophetic pallor of coming dawn.

Doctor McNeill wiped the perspiration from his forehead and put on his glasses again. I waited for him to resume, and as he kept silent, I spoke softly.

"She lived? She was found? Was it ever explained?"

The doctor cleared his throat.

"Yes—she lived, in a way. And it was explained. I told you there was no bewitchment—only cruel, pitiful, material horror."

It was Sally Compton who had made the discovery. She had ridden over to the Davis cabin the next afternoon to talk over the party with Audrey, and had seen no smoke from the chimney. That was queer. It had turned very warm again, yet Audrey was usually cooking something at that hour. The mules were making hungry-sounding noises in the barn, and there was no sign of old Wolf sunning himself in the accustomed spot by the door.

Altogether, Sally did not like the look of the place, so was very timid and hesitant as she dismounted and knocked. She got no answer, but waited some time before trying the crude door of split logs. The lock, it appeared, was unfastened; and she slowly pushed her way in. Then, perceiving what was there, she reeled back, gasped, and clung to the jamb to preserve her balance.

A terrible odor had welled out as she opened the door, but that was not what had stunned her. It was what she had seen. For within that shadowy cabin monstrous things had happened and three shocking objects remained on the floor to awe and baffle the beholder.

Near the burned out fireplace was the great dog—purple decay on the skin left bare by mange and old age, and the whole carcass burst by the puffing effect of rattlesnake poison. It must have been bitten by a veritable legion of the reptiles.

To the right of the door was the ax-hacked remnant of what had been a man—clad in a nightshirt, and with the shattered bulk of a lantern clenched in one hand. *He was totally free from any sign of snake-bite.* Near him lay the ensanguined ax, carelessly discarded.

And wriggling flat on the floor was a loathsome, vacant-eyed thing that had been a woman, but was now only a mute mad caricature. All that this thing could do was to hiss, and hiss, and hiss.

Both the doctor and I were brushing cold drops from our foreheads by this time. He poured something from a flask on his desk, took a nip, and handed another glass to me. I could only suggest tremulously and stupidly:

"So Walker had only fainted that first time—the screams roused him, and the ax did the rest?"

"Yes." Doctor McNeill's voice was low. "But he met his death from snakes just the same. It was his fear working in two ways—it made him faint, and it made him fill his wife with the wild stories that caused her to strike out when she thought she saw the snake devil."

I thought for a moment.

"And Audrey—wasn't it queer how the curse of Yig seemed to work itself out on her? I suppose the impression of hissing snakes had been fairly ground into her."

"Yes. There were lucid spells at first, but they got to be fewer and fewer. Her hair came white at the roots as it grew, and later began to fall out. The skin grew blotchy, and when she died——"

I interrupted with a start.

"*Died?* Then what was that—that thing downstairs?"

Doctor McNeill spoke gravely.

"*That* is what was born to her three quarters of a year afterwards. There were three more of them—two were even worse—but this is the only one that lived."



# The Yeast Men

by David H. Keller, M. D.

*Dr. Keller may have herewith dreamed up the secret weapon that will end war. Above all, it is a humane weapon as readers will learn, but it is well nigh an invincible one. He thought up this idea back in the early Amazing Stories and it is still considered one of Dr. Keller's best, one of the most original conceptions of an author distinguished by his originality. As might be expected of a man trained in the science of saving life and lessening pain, Dr. Keller put his mind to the problem of humanizing warfare. What he came up with was not a new bomb, a new gun, a new plane or tank . . . but a military secret that might lie under the nose of any housewife or cook. But read for yourself all about the terrible war between Eupenia and Moronia. . . .*

UNLESS the unexpected happened, Moronia would be destroyed. The last war had killed and maimed many of her young men, ruined her finances and deprived her people of even a hope for better years to come. The kingdom of Eupenia now completely surrounded Moronia, shutting off on all sides her commerce and intercourse with friendly nations. The next war would end the struggle and strife that had lasted for centuries.

Like a previous conqueror, Premier Plautz arose day after day in the Eupenian Senate to crow out his celebrated, quadruple-worded threat—a threat that he hoped some day would be fulfilled prophecy. "Moronia must be destroyed!" he cried, and the Eupenians, drunk with success and power, answered with renewed plaudits and increased appropriations for the final struggle. "Moronia must be destroyed" he said on the first of September. "She lies in the middle of our fair country, like a dreaded and threatening cancer. We have cut off her commerce and bled her manpower white. Now is the time to destroy her, and occupy her farms and cities with our own deserving populace. Moronia must be destroyed! Our army hopes to occupy her capital by Christmas Day. After such a victory we will have good reason to celebrate the Birthday of our Master. From that day on the name of Moronia will be only a memory and a warning—a memory of our power and a warning to any future enemy. Moronia must be destroyed! Moronia shall be destroyed!"

Immediately after this short address the Senate adjourned. The War Council met that afternoon to perfect plans for the next war, as yet unde-

clared. Just as he did in the Senate, Premier Plantz dominated this body. At once he asked the Chief of the Air Service if his corps was prepared for war.

"We are, Your Excellency!" was the unexpected reply from Colonel Van Dort. "We are prepared for war, but we are also prepared for more than the attack. I have in readiness one thousand planes, each manned by two experienced aviators. At your command, the air service will begin the assault, but I warn you in advance that we will lose one thousand planes and two thousand men at the first attack. We are prepared—for Death!"

"That is the speech of a coward. Are all of the corps like you?" demanded Premier Plantz. "I am informed the Moronians have only a few air craft. Of what are you afraid?"

"We fear nothing," replied Van Dort, white with suppressed anger, "but we know the truth. Since the last war, Moronia has perfected some kind of a lightray. A machine is placed every mile along their entire border. From these machines rays go out, presumably in a fan shape. When the ray strikes an airplane, the engine not only stops but apparently explodes. No one knows how high in the air these rays go—we have never been able to rise above the range of their power. We have been experimenting and have found no way of defending the plane against the ray. So far, twenty of our planes, disguised as commercial machines, have been destroyed and our aviators killed. In every instance the bodies were brought to the frontier by the Moronians, and each time they simply explained that something went wrong with the machinery and the plane dropped in their country. We have every reason to believe that they have perfected some power which will render impossible any attack on the enemy by the air. What happened to twenty planes will happen to a thousand. That is why I said my corps was prepared for death."

The Premier started to pound the table with his fist. "Why was I not informed of this? What has been done to protect our machines? The destruction of one plane was enough to justify a new war. What have you been doing besides skulking in cowardice?"

"I made daily reports to the Chief-of-Staff," retorted Van Dort. "The entire matter is on record. For a month our Department of Physics and Chemistry has been working on this problem. They thought they had a satisfactory defense, and the last ten planes were supposed to have been protected, but they crumpled like the first ten."

"Colonel Van Dort is right," interrupted the Chief-of-Staff, General Hurlung. "All reports have been filed regularly and a daily summary has been sent to your office. After all, it is a purely military problem. We still have the other arms of the service, the cavalry, artillery and infantry. With our cavalry alone we could overrun Moronia. We need not worry about the air service."

"Oh! I suppose so. I suppose so!" replied the Premier petulantly. "Still I wanted to blow them into hell with air bombs—all of them, men, women and children."

"But if you did that you would also destroy property," argued General Hurlung. "The infantry can wipe out the population just as effectively without the loss of a single structure. What worries me is this: They have a powerful ray of some kind which we know can destroy a plane at ten thou-

sand feet. Suppose they turn those rays sidewise on our advancing army? What will happen?"

"Bah! You are growing old, General," sneered the Premier. "Have we not the artillery to blast our way through such infernal machines? Our infantry are men, not machines. They can live through any kind of hell fire and win the victory. I am fretted at the atmosphere of doubt that covers this council of war. We will attack on the first of October, opening with artillery, following with cavalry and mopping up with the infantry. These machines you dread so much are only machines, and all machines must be run by men. Kill the men and the machines are harmless. General Hurlung, you will prepare all branches of the army for the attack. Colonel Van Dort, you are dismissed from the service for cowardice. Go where you please, but if you are in Eupenia at the end of two days, I will have you shot."

Van Dort, drawing his dress sword, broke it over his knee and threw the pieces on the table in front of the Premier. Said Van Dort, "A country that thus rewards honesty is a land rotten to the core." The men around the table kept an awkward silence as he left the room.

Premier Plautz stood up. "You gentlemen know what to do. I will accept no excuses for incompetency. Moronia must be destroyed. We will meet again a week from today. The Secret Service had better follow Van Dort and imprison him. I do not trust him. Keep him in solitary confinement and I will deal finally with him in a few days."

Van Dort, however, was already in his automobile, leaving Eupenia as fast as he could. He paused at his home only long enough to almost throw his wife and baby and a few valuables into his car; then he started for Moronia at seventy miles an hour. Van Dort was thoroughly mad. For ten years he had served in the air corps of Eupenia, advancing slowly from mechanician to Chief of Service. During that time he had done his best. Under his leadership the corps had achieved the finest type of morale. He knew that his men were always ready to gamble on a chance in war, but he could not sit still and see his entire force sent to what he felt was certain death. During his ten years of military service he had had ample chance to study the Premier. He knew that every man who had dared to oppose Plautz had come to an unfortunate end, disgrace, exile or death. Life, to Van Dort, with his wife and baby, was too sweet to be sacrificed unless absolutely necessary. The former Chief of the Air Service fully realized this. He increased the speed of his car. Moronia was his destination for other reasons than because it was the nearest border. He felt he could trust them, as enemies, more than he could trust the other nations who were more friendly to Eupenia. Also, his wife had come from that nation. She was the daughter of a former Moronian general, who had died in the last war. Van Dort had been a member of the army of occupation, and once having met this particular young lady, all his loyalty to Eupenia was insufficient to prevent him from falling in love. He felt that if he had to die, it would be better to die with his wife and baby in the mountains of Moronia, than in solitude in an Eupenian prison.

The radio message beat them to the frontier, and Van Dort saw that the barricade had been lowered. It was a sturdy wooden gate, but the automobile

hit it going eighty miles an hour and reduced it to kindling. The car finally stopped, rather disheveled in looks but with the motor still running, one mile inside Moronia. There Van Dort stopped as soon as possible, having a deep respect for the vigilance and accurate shooting of the Moronian border patrol. He did not wish to arouse their suspicion in any way. The car was soon surrounded by cavalymen, who politely but firmly asked for full details as to his identity and the reason for entering the country in such a precipitous manner. Realizing that there was no reason for deceit, he gave them a brief account of his trouble and asked to be taken to the General-in-Chief of the Moronian army.

Moronia, nominally a monarchy, was in every respect democratic, except that it had a king. Every citizen felt an equal amount of reverence and fraternity for this monarch. There was rank, both in civil and military life, but promotion was by merit and without either syncopephancy or tyranny. Consequently it was easier to see the Commanding General in Moronia than it was to see the Third Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in Espenia. The Moronians lived among the mountains, and like the eagles of the crags, prized their liberty. In consequence of all this it was only a few hours before Van Dort was telling his story to General Androvitz and his staff.

They believed all that he said. Especially did they believe him after his wife talked to them in their native patois. Some staff members present had known her father well. One old officer was even able to remember the celebration of her christening. The general discussion was finally ended by Van Dort.

"I fled because I knew that Premier Plantz intended to have me killed, and I came here because of my wife and because I felt keenly the injustice of another war. Moronia is to be destroyed for no other reason than selfishness and greed. The force against you is overwhelming. I see nothing save your final and complete destruction. If I have to die I want to die fighting rather than in prison, or shot, or hanged like a criminal. I offer you my services, General Androvitz, and I am willing to serve your country in any capacity."

The General at once sent for the King to join in their deliberations. Rudolph Hubelaire came, a little, withered, one-armed man with the fire of a lion in his eyes. He heard the reports without expression. The other men watched him anxiously. Finally he spoke.

"We can die but once. Resistance, in our weakened state, will be but a grand gesture. Espenia may conquer the country but she will never enslave our patriots. They and their families may die, but they will never surrender. When the time comes, we will fight. When that is over, the survivors will retire to our mountain forts. There we will live with the goats and chamois. I am sorry that it all has to end thus, but we have done our best. One more invention like our ultra lighttrays would have saved us—but our scientists have done their utmost, and as we have failed, so have they. Colonel Van Dort, we trust your honesty and welcome you to our ranks. Your desire to die on the field of battle will probably be realized."

The meeting was just breaking up, each participant ready to carry the sad

news to his friends, when the guard at the door announced the presence of Mr. Billings, one of Moronia's staff of scientific investigators.

"Poor Billings," said the King, "harmless fellow from America. He has worked in our laboratory for years without pay except for his bare expenses, and he is about broken hearted because, so far, he has failed to make any important discovery. I wish we could get him back to America before war begins. Let us humor the old gentleman and listen to his story. I want to show his age the proper respect. Let there be no levity. His loyalty and faithful endeavor demands our greatest courtesy."

Billings came in and was seated by the King. He was stoop-shouldered, bald and trembling. His high-pitched voice cracked like static under his excitement.

"Your Majesty and Gentlemen," he said. "After years of most tedious experimentation, I have finally discovered a method of defending ourselves against the Eupenians."

"Fine!" said the King. "Now tell us all about it."

"I propose that we make an army of Yeast Men."

"That is a fine idea, Mr. Billings," said the King soothingly. "I am sure that your discovery has merit. Now I want you to go over to America and take a long vacation, and after you are thoroughly rested you can come back and visit us again."

"But you do not understand," pleaded the old man. "I suppose you think that I'm senile. The invention is complete and I am sure it will work. It is practical and simple. The one machine I have made functions perfectly. It can easily be duplicated, and anyone can run it. All we need is an abundance of yeast and hundreds of machines. You shoot the little fellows out like bullets from a machine gun."

"Well, what happens then?" asked General Androvitz.

"They just grow and walk around a little and then they die."

"If they do that they will be typical soldiers," interrupted the Chief of the Artillery Service. "That is about all we will do between now and Christmas."

"But in dying they will win the victory!" eagerly chirped the inventor in his high-pitched cricket-like voice. "Can't you understand that they will die and rot in Eupenia?"

The King gently took the old man by the shoulder and as he talked tears came to his eyes.

"My dear Billings. The thing you describe is just a soldier. For hundreds of years the Moronians have died in defense of their country. They have died and rotted, and yet we, as a nation, have slowly withered away. Brave men by the thousands have done just that, and to what avail? Your eagerness to help has worried you sick. Go and take a long rest. Yeast Men and real men may die and rot but our dear Moronia is doomed."

"But can't you see it?" pleaded the inventor. "Oh! Please try to visualize it. Yeast Men by the millions and billions walking into Eupenia and rotting there. Can't you see how it's going to work out?"

"I beg your pardon," asked General Androvitz, "but did you say billions?"

"I did. A few drops of yeast develops into a soldier six feet tall. Give me

as many machines as those you made to generate the anti-aircraft rays and I will produce Yeast Men by the million. I will make a million every day as long as it is necessary."

"And they live just so long and then die?" asked the King.

"Yes, they live about three days. During that time they are able to move about twenty-five miles. Then they die and rot."

"A fairy tale," said the Premier, who, up to this time, had kept silent.

"But I can prove it. I have made one. If you see just one of them will you believe it? Let me show you just one!"

The King held up his hand for silence.

"Gentlemen, let me talk to Billings. Please do not interrupt. He is nervous—and so am I. We must get to the real truth in this matter. I would never forgive myself if he had really found something of value and lost it because of our incredulity. Now, Friend Billings, let us pretend that we are alone. Pay no attention to these other men. Listen to my questions, and answer them as simply as you can. Remember that I am not a scientist and do not understand big words. Now, how much yeast does it take to make a soldier?"

"About two drops."

"How big does he grow?"

"About six feet tall."

"Do they look like real men?"

"Just a little. You see they are made of dough."

"Do they walk as we do?"

"No. It is a sort of creeping shuffle—an amoeba-like movement."

"If they are not destroyed, how long will they live?"

"About three days."

"What happens then?"

"They cease to grow or move. They die and decay—rot."

"Suppose one of them is shot or has his head cut off with a sabre, or is torn into pieces by a cannon ball, what then?"

"Each piece would keep on living and growing and moving until the end of the third day."

"You said they would move at eight miles an hour?"

"Yes, if nothing stopped them. They would be in Eupenia at the end of forty-eight hours, and by the end of the third day they would rot there."

"Are you sure of all this?"

"It worked out in the laboratory."

"What makes them grow?"

"It is a peculiar form of yeast. In the machine we compress it. Just as soon as it is liberated, it begins to extract nitrogen from the air, and expands. It not only expands but it actually grows by the rapid division of the yeast cells."

"I do not understand it," said the King, "but I am willing to take your word for it. What makes them move?"

"Radiant energy. Before the yeast is put into the guns, it is thoroughly energized with a form of radium."

"But these peculiar creatures cannot fight; they have no weapons: how can they win a war?"

"By their rotting, Your Majesty. I have tried to make that plain to you. They die and rot."

"You mean they decay?"

"Exactly. They dissolve into pools of slime. They form a puddle about three feet in diameter and weighing about thirty pounds."

"How would such decaying masses stop an invading army?"

"It is their stench that will stop them. The yeast is mixed with culture of *Bacillus Butericus* and other foetid germs. These grow in the dying and dead yeast, and produce a dreadful odor."

"That may be true, but your idea that it will stop an army is all nonsense. No soldier was checked by just a smell!"

"But this will stop them. I have a little bottle here. It has one drop of the end-slime diluted a thousand times. Have one of your officers smell it."

"Any volunteers?" asked the King.

"Certainly," answered the Chief of Artillery. "I have been in three wars and have smelled everything horrible known to any form of campaign. It will never hurt me."

The inventor held the opened bottle under the military man's nose. Roughly, the soldier took two deep sniffs. Then Billings corked the bottle, while the volunteer slumped from the chair to the floor and lay there, white, sweating and vomiting. The others hastened to help him loosen his collar.

"My God!" exclaimed the King. "Just two whiffs from a bottle containing a thousandth of a drop, and each dead Yeast Man produces thirty pounds of the stuff. Will it kill?"

"Not men, but plants," was Billings' reply. "Look at this." He emptied the bottle on a large clay jar holding a blooming cyclamen. At once the plant withered and died. A curious foetid odor filled the room. The King rose hastily and sought an opened window. So did the rest seek doors and open windows, carrying the fainting Chief of the Artillery Service with them.

As soon as they got outside the room, in pure air, the King turned to the inventor.

"Show me just one man like those you describe, Mr. Billings—just one man, and the resources of the kingdom are at your command."

"I have made them. I have one that is now nearly three days old. My assistants have been leading him around a deserted race track. You see, they go in a straight line unless led, and the only way we could keep him under observation was to lead him around in a track."

"We will go and see him," said the King, "and we will take with us the Professor of Mathematics from the University. Gentlemen, follow in your cars."

The party reassembled at an old race track, overgrown with grass and a quarter of a mile in circumference. Walking slowly around this track was an assistant from the Moronian laboratories. Other men were resting on a bench. The walking man held a rope and was leading a peculiar creature. It was a Yeast Man.

Imagine a six-foot man of dough, with a crust hard enough to hold it erect, yet viscid enough to allow it to move forward. A creature with a head but

no face, with spade-like hands without fingers, and instead of two legs and feet, simply—simply a body like a skirt which rested firmly on the ground on a two footed base. It was the convulsive movement of this base and the mass of fermenting yeast above it that in some way enabled it to move slowly over the ground. It was such a creature, with a broad canvas band around its waist, that the Moronians saw being led around the track. Mr. Billings ran forward eagerly and conferred with his men. Then he returned to the group of officers surrounding the King.

"They report that it has gone around the track ninety nine times. That is twenty-three miles, nearly twenty-four. It was four feet tall at the end of the first day and at the end of the second day it was full grown. It is now nearly three days old, and if our calculations are correct, it will soon die."

The Yeast Man continued to move slowly around the track. Just in front of the tumbled-down grandstand it stopped. Billings instructed his men to remove the canvas belt. The party gathered around the motionless figure. Suddenly it began to grow shorter and stouter. It swayed, and finally out of balance, started to fall forward, bending at the waist. An unpleasant odor filled the air. Abruptly it bent double, and literally melted into a pool of greenish yellow slime. The odor grew increasingly frightful, so that it drove the observers further and yet further away. The grass touched by the slime withered and died.

The King turned to the professor of mathematics. "Professor," he said, "estimate the size of that puddle. Multiply it by five billion. Estimate the territory permeated by the odor. Suppose such masses, five billion such masses, were scattered equally over Eupenia. What would be the result?"

The professor figured on the back on an old envelope, using the stub of a pencil which he nervously stuck in his mouth after each fifth figure. Finally he said: "If you could arrange to have them die at different places, the whole of Eupenia would be covered six inches deep."

The King turned to his staff.

"I am satisfied, gentlemen. We will have hundreds of these machines made, and when we are ready to begin operations, Mr. Billings can make five thousand Yeast Men to start with. Our soldiers will lead them to the border and turn them loose on all highways and open spaces leading to Eupenia. At the same time, we will continue making them by the million. Our attack will come before the enemy is ready. If it works, we will win a bloodless victory. The only way we can make it a success is to make the attack a total surprise. Cut all the wires leading to Eupenia. Confiscate all the radio sets at once. Be more than ever careful watching the suspected spies. It would not be a bad idea to imprison them until this is over. Triple the border patrol. Permit no intercommunication. Turn over the entire resources of the kingdom to Mr. Billings and his associates. At the same time do not omit a single item leading to the preparedness of our little army. I understood Van Dort to say that we will be attacked on the first of October. We will attack before then—just as soon as Billings is ready. Have any of you a suggestion?"

"Yes," said the Chief of Artillery, still pale and sweating from his recent nausea. "Why not let me follow the Yeast Men and blow them to pieces with



shrapnel? Make five yeast pieces and five stretch pots out of each Yeast Man?"

"I think," replied the King, "that the Eupenians will be only too anxious to do that job for us. Again I repeat, gentlemen, that we must observe the greatest secrecy. Keep the anti-aircraft machines in constant operation, especially on cloudy days. May God save our Country and bless our good friend, Mr. Billings. Now, gentlemen, to work, day and night, without rest, to make this machinery, gather an abundance of material and train men to use the machines."

Near every road connecting the two countries, large canvas camouflage screens were erected. Captive observation balloons sent up by the Eupenian air service reported no massing of Mororian troops. Behind these canvas screens, however, thousands of men and women of the little mountain kingdom took turns leading five thousand Yeast Men on their monotonous journey toward death. All day and all night on the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth of September, these five thousand Yeast Men moved and grew behind the protecting curtains. Their genesis had been so timed that at dusk on the third day some were two days, twenty-three hours and thirty minutes old. Then they were turned loose on the main highways and started on their slow shuffle toward Eupenia. Some, of course, were checked at the border barricades. Others crawled around or over and had advanced several hundred yards into the enemy's country before dissolution occurred.

In the meantime peculiar-looking machine guns were being placed at intervals of one mile, each manned by a group of trained Mororian soldiers. These guns were simple in construction, and mounted on sturdy tripods. Above each was a small hopper, from which yeast was fed to a small but powerful press operated by condensed air. Each blow of the ram produced a Yeast Man one-eighth of an inch high. These were dropped into the barrel of the gun and shot into the air several hundred yards from the gun. Like thistle-down they floated, gradually dropping to the ground, base downward and head erect. Immediately on touching the earth, they began their peculiar shuffling movement, which was to continue in the exact direction in which they had started. As the guns worked, they revolved slowly through a forty-five degree horizontal arc.

Each gun fired two Yeast Men a second. That meant one hundred and twenty a minute; seven thousand, two hundred an hour, or 172,800 in the course of twenty-four hours. There were seven hundred guns made, but only about five hundred were in actual use at any one time; the others acting as replacements. Counting the total time these five hundred guns were in use, it was later estimated that they fired about ten days. This made a total of 1,728,000 for each gun, or a grand total of 864,000,000 Yeast Men manufactured during the campaign. Each Yeast Man, dead, produced thirty pounds of end-slime, a total of 12,960,000 tons. It will be remembered that this slime, in a one-to-a-thousand dilution, was sufficiently strong to produce disabbling vomiting.

These guns began operations twenty-four hours before the five thousand fully-grown Yeast Men were liberated. Then they moved slowly forward, and behind them came successive waves of smaller and yet smaller men of

dough. At the end of the first twenty four hours, the oldest of the Yeast Men, who had been shot from the five hundred guns, were nearly four feet high. The woods and fields of Eupenia bordering on Moronia were dotted with the peculiar creatures.

The statement made by Mr. Billings that he would be able to manufacture them by the billions never materialized. The machines worked more slowly than he had anticipated. It was also seen that a large number of Yeast Men were caught in trees and ravines and were unable to continue their march. Yet a sufficient number reached the smooth highways and level pastures to do everything that was required of them. Also the work was facilitated later in the campaign by mounting the guns in airplanes and literally showering the towns with the little fellows. This, however, was not attempted till it was seen that the morale of the Eupenians was completely destroyed.

During the entire campaign not a single Moronian died of injuries incident to warfare, though time and again many of them fell exhausted from lack of sleep. The radium workers not only received painful burns but were affected for several years as the result of the prolonged exposure to the mysterious emanations from the weird element. These, however, were but slight horrors of war compared with what might have happened had the Eupenian attack found the Moronians in their previous defenseless condition.

During September, 19—, all had been active in the kingdom dominated by Premier Plautz, who was the real ruler of Eupenia, in place of the feeble-minded King. All branches of the army, including the aviation section, had been mobilized. Fifty thousand trained and well-armed men were in camp ready to begin the destruction of the little mountainous kingdom of Moronia. The attack was timed to begin on the first of October. Premier Plautz no longer was content with his usual statement that Moronia must be destroyed. He was now saying that the time had come for the actual work of destruction to begin. An interesting fact was that the escape of Colonel Van Dort and his admission into Moronia as a place of refuge was to be made the actual *cavus Acti*. On the thirtieth of September his surrender was to be demanded within twenty-four hours. If it were not conceded, the Eupenian army would at once advance. If the demand were complied with, the army would advance anyway. Moronia, as far as Premier Plautz was concerned, had to be destroyed.

A broad highway connected the capital cities of the two kingdoms. This was the road used by Van Dort in his dramatic flight for safety. It was here at the border that he had crashed through the barricade. At this point, the Eupenian border guard was commanded by Lieutenant Kraut, and under him was a company of ninety privates and non commissioned officers. On the evening of the nineteenth of September, the Lieutenant was writing his daily report and wishing something would happen to relieve the deadly monotony of routine. Just as he had finished this report and was signing it, a sentry rushed in and stated that a number of peculiar looking naked men were at the boundary gate trying to enter the country. Suspecting a trap, the Lieutenant at once called his entire force to arms and personally investigated the matter. When he approached the barricade, he was astonished to see a number of

grayish white creatures, six feet high, moving aimlessly on the other side of the gate. They had heads without features, bodies without legs, arms without fingers. Cautiously, he touched one and shivered at the peculiar sensation that was imparted by contacting the animal's skin. Realizing that his men were watching him closely and that any sign of nervousness on his part would be communicated to them, and feeling certain, too, that each of the peculiar shapes was but a mask and cloak for a Moronian soldier, he drew his revolver and shot one of the odd things several times through the haunt section. The bullet holes closed immediately and there was no blood. The thing kept on with its curious shuffling movement.

"Attention, men," he commanded. "Open the gates and we will take them all prisoners. God knows what they are, but they cannot hurt us anyway, and we will hold them till tomorrow and then send them in trucks to the General-in-Chief."

His men obeyed the command but there were many more of the new creatures than there were soldiers and thus while over seventy were captured, several hundred passed the barricade and continued moving down the road.

In the guardhouse the telephone was ringing violently. Headquarters wanted to know if anything new had developed and whether Lieutenant Kraut and his command were safe. Disquieting rumors were being received from the other outposts and they wanted an immediate report. Lieutenant Kraut started to tell about the peculiar things he had captured, and the Major at the other end of the line reprimanded him for being drunk again. The Lieutenant protested that he was perfectly sober. The Major demanded an exact description of the new animal. The Lieutenant had one brought into his office and held near his desk while he gave the description. Even while he was talking, the animal softened and began to melt. The Lieutenant described the process as long as he could talk. Even while writhing on the floor in deadly nausea and vomiting, he tried to tell what had happened, but his retching only convinced the Major at Headquarters that the Lieutenant was heavily drunk. Finally the Lieutenant was dragged out of the office by two of his men, who waded through pools of indescribable filth to rescue him. He was too sick to realize that his entire command had fled the Post, though here and there one of the soldiers lay on the road too sick to move. Outside, the road was impassable on account of the puddles of slime which dotted it. Cursing and vomiting, the Lieutenant staggered through the dark woods, seeking pure air and freedom from the stench, which even in memory produced a recurrence of the prostrating nausea.

Meanwhile those of the novel creatures who still lived were shuffling slowly down the broad highway, every few minutes losing one of their number by death and decay. In the dark hours of the night they died unseen and unmourned, but each of them left behind horrible evidence that they had once lived. Over pools of slime others of their kind walked, some three feet high, others a foot high and here and there could be seen midgets only a few inches high but resembling their larger brothers in every detail. When the sun rose, there also arose from every road between the two kingdoms, the smell of death a million times magnified. It was as though Moronia were surrounded by a

circle of decay three miles deep. Meantime the smaller, younger Yeast Men were advancing into Eupenia, through the woods and meadows, tumbling into ravines, catching fast in trees and bushes, falling into streams and being swept away with the current, and yet ever with a sound like soft snow falling, the little ones, new born, were floating through the air like goose down, and on and on the machines along the border of Moronia kept up their gentle thump-thump-thump and with each thump was created one more new life, one more soldier, brainless, fearless, bloodless, filled with the urge to keep on moving till dissolution came. And they all moved downhill, from the mountains of Moronia, into the enemies' more level country. They were perfect soldiers.

All the Eupenian outposts had experienced the same novel sensations and made the same report that was made by Lieutenant Kraut as soon as he was able to talk. None of the officers who reported to Headquarters could produce any proof that they had really seen such massive monstrosities. Every officer had to periodically stop his verbal report till another onset of vomiting had passed. The Commander-in-Chief thoroughly believed that they had gone drunk and insane through the effects of cheap whiskey and put them all under arrest. At the same time he sent several spies on motorcycles to make a thorough investigation. These returned babbling hysterically of an army of creatures of all sizes, and every spy was vomiting with the same enthusiastic persistency that the officers had shown. The Commander-in-Chief began to curse the morals of his army and decided to get drunk himself.

Even then Eupenia might have saved herself, though it is a question as to just how efficacious any campaign of sharpshooting, or any building of fences or digging of ditches, would have proved. What really happened was no doubt inevitable, yet the fact remains, and it is of historical importance, that twenty-four hours passed before any offensive was started. Data was gathered and observations and lengthy reports were made. Otherwise nothing was done. These reports, especially from the border regions, were of such a varied and fantastic nature that little value could be placed on them.

Finally Premier Plautz decided to personally investigate the situation. He took with him the Chief-of-Staff and a group of scientists from the University. They found the new creatures by the hundreds of thousands and of all sizes. They also came as near as they could to several of the paddles of end slime. An effort to observe these carefully with the aid of gas masks was useless. Even when some of the foetid material was gathered at the end of a long pole, it could not be brought close enough to make observations of value. Several of the things were carefully studied, both chemically and anatomically, but not a single observer connected the moving oddities with the pools of decay. It must be remembered that after the first hour of the offensive no more Yeast Men had died, and the reports of the rapid dissolution of the first wave were entirely discredited.

For the first time in his life, Premier Plautz was at a loss to know what to do. To him the entire situation was incomprehensible. At one side of his automobile a five-foot abortion was slowly moving, its featureless face seem-

ingly asking only one question. "Why was I made?" In the Premier's hand was a watch crystal and on the glass was a new creation, barely a quarter of an inch high, in every respect the exact duplicate of its brother standing by the side of the car.

"What does this mean, Professor Owens?" the puzzled Premier asked the Chemistry teacher. "What kind of things are these? They cannot fight. They have no weapons, no brains, no blood. All they know is how to grow and move forward. Evidently they come from Moronia, but for what reason? Is it a declaration of war?"

The old Professor answered to the best of his ability and what he said was surprisingly near the truth.

"They are just Yeast Men, Your Excellency. I have examined them in every way, chemically and microscopically and they are just peculiarly shaped masses of dough animated by some very active yeast. Their movements resemble dough overflowing a pan. I do not know what they mean, but I do know what they are. I have had one cut up and baked in loaves and it tastes like a fairly good kind of whole wheat bread."

Here the Chief-of Staff interrupted.

"Of course we could consider it as a declaration of war and attack, but what would be the influence on the world's opinion of us? Reporters would rush in from Paris and London papers. They would make us the laughing stock of the universe. What could we say? That we were afraid of lumps of yeast? That we were using our artillery on potential loaves of bread? So far, these creatures have not committed a single depredation. No lives have been lost, not a house burned, not a single pig or chicken killed. Think what a reporter from an American paper would do to us if he had a chance to write it up? How would he describe our infantry pouring bullets into dough, our brave cavalry men cutting off the heads of the bread men? Far better would it be to take them as fast as we can and distribute them among all our people and let them make bread of them. That would be a joke! The Eupenian nation being fed at the expense of the very enemy who hates them so!"

"I believe you are right" answered the Premier. "There is certainly nothing in such creatures to be afraid of, though their number seems to be increasing hourly. It was all well enough for the ignorant peasants to run in terror from their farms, but the city folk will look on it as a great joke—especially if we use the proper kind of propaganda. Suppose we return at once to the Capital and prepare a statement for the press."

The next edition of *The Staatsbode*, the leading afternoon paper in Eupenia, ran the following news item on the front page.

**HAVE YOU A LITTLE YEAST MAN IN YOUR HOME? IF NOT, WHY NOT?**

*All citizens are urged to provide at once their homes with one or more Yeast Men. These peculiar creatures are very harmless and the Department of Chemical Research assures us that they make a very fair quality of bread. They come in all sizes. When little, your children can play with them as dolls; when full sized, they can reduce the High Cost of Living.*

*All citizens having automobiles are commanded to go into the country regions and bring to their homes as many of these Yeast Men as they can accommodate. Bring extra ones for your poorer neighbor.*

*Army trucks will make regular trips to bring these Yeast Men to the Capital. After they are paraded through the streets they will be distributed to all families not yet provided.*

This item was published on the afternoon of the second day. All that afternoon and evening thousands of Yeast Men were brought into the towns and cities of Eupenia in private automobiles and army trucks. The Premier, quick to act for his personal advantage, issued an order canceling all contracts for flour and directing that the army be supplied with bread from the dough creatures. Each company in the army was directed to forage for its own supply and to keep them in their tents till they were needed for baking bread.

The next morning, which was the beginning of the third day of the Moronian offensive, thousands of Yeast Men were exhibited in parade through the streets of the Eupenian capital, each one in charge of a soldier. The citizens laughed till they cried at the comical spectacle and slapped each other on the back as they pointed out "the only kind of soldiers Moronia could attack with." Within a few hours it became quite the fashion to have your own personal Yeast Man. Children walked around leading their little dough pets. High School pupils painted theirs with the class colors and numerals. These things could be led and guided. Herr Schmidt, Honorable President of the Ancient Order of Eupenian Cab Drivers, made a harness for a pair and had them draw a light buggy through the streets, with his grandson as driver.

That third day was a lute day for all Eupenia.

The Premier, however, had gone to unnecessary labor to bring the Yeast Men into the city. By noon they were beginning to arrive of their own accord, by the hundreds of thousands; by afternoon the streets were crowded with them. Instead of being a joke, this thing was becoming a problem. They were gathered into the parks, thrown into the cellars, herded into the country, but still they came in increasing numbers. Every house had one or more; not a basement but was filled with a reserve supply; the harracks and tents of the army were overrun. The morning paper estimated that there was enough dough to provide bread for half a year. The problem now was not how to get them into the city but how to get them out and keep them out. In spite of Premier Plaurz' reassurance in the afternoon paper and definite orders for the army to advance on the next day, the entire populace was beginning to be worried.

Their chief anxiety arose because of the fact that they could not understand the situation.

Then, just towards evening, the Yeast Men began to die. Not all at once, but in increasing numbers. And twilight advanced to add darkness to the horror. Then they died by the thousands and hundreds of thousands all over Eupenia. It was bad enough in the country districts where here and there the pools of end-slime dotted the woods and meadows; but in the cities, es-

pecially in the Capital, the immediate result was a panic. In hut and palace, home and barracks, life was no longer possible because of these paddles of nausea-producing slime. The houses were filled with it. The streets were filled with it. The only living things that were unaffected were the Yeast Men waiting their turn to die. With sightless faces they shuffled along the streets passing unconcernedly through the decayed bodies of their brothers with apparently only one idea—to keep moving till death came to enable them to add their bit to the defense of their country.

The people fled. Sick and sweating, pale faced and gasping, incapacitated and vomiting, they ran from the terror. The army fled, cursing the Premier for thinking to feed them on such putrid offal. Nothing could hold them, or restore discipline. And around Moronia was a widening, desolate, deserted ring in which there was no living thing.

The people fled to the border. The neighboring Kingdoms, however, friendly as they were to Eupenia, thought of their own safety. In this strange vomiting, in the tales of delirium told by the first refugees, they thought they saw symptoms of a new and deadly contagious disease and at once threw a line of bayonets along their borders and forbade emigration from the stricken country.

Eupenia deserted her Capital without shedding a drop of blood.

Premier Plautz, as soon as he had sufficiently recovered from his own personal vomiting, to consider the matter, called a meeting of his Staff and ordered the advances to begin against the enemy. This, he said, was only a new method of conducting war. Were they to be conquered by smells or inert lumps of yeast? Let the artillery blow them to pieces. Let the cavalry cut them to pieces. The infantry could build fires and burn them. A faithful remnant of the once proud army attempted to follow his orders but no soldier, however brave, can continually fight on an empty stomach, and no officer, however capable, can give orders while constantly vomiting. The army, from the General-in-Chief down to the privates, were continually sick with the sickness of Jonah's Whale.

The whole resistance was hopeless. The Yeast Men arrived day after day in increasing numbers and they could not be killed. They could be mutilated, decapitated, but each piece lived and moved ever onwards.

Efforts at their mutilation only added to the horror, and put the finishing touches to the collapse of morale.

What use cutting a thing to pieces when each piece kept on living and advancing? How could any enemy be killed when it could not bleed?

Eupenia was hysterical.

On the sixth day, the army revolted, killed Premier Plautz and declared the Kingdom a Republic.

Immediately they sued for peace by radio. Moronia suspected a trap and refused to grant an armistice. Her guns continued the deadly shower. Finally, on the tenth day of the unequal struggle, peace was declared.

Afterwards, the world Named Moronia for not granting an immediate armistice, but it is only fair to her to say that she did not, at that time, know the full horror of the war and never did realize it as the Eupenians did. She

was anxious enough for peace, but she wanted a peace that would be permanent.

But Eupenia not only wanted peace, she wanted help to rid her of the millions of tons of terrible end-slime. Mr. Billings was called in for advice. He laughed at the question.

"The smell lasts only for ten days," he said, "and then dies out and the slime then becomes a highly concentrated manure, more rich than any commercial fertilizer that we have yet discovered. The fields of Eupenia will be more fertile because of this manure. Tell the farmers to be patient and hopeful. They will have fine crops next year. The city people can shovel it up for their window boxes: it will grow wonderful violets."

Later, at the close of the Peace Festival, Mr. Billings was decorated. The little old King, Rudolph Hubelaire, put his one arm around the inventor and kissed him on both cheeks. Then he pinned the decoration of the Golden Moronian Eagle on his chest while the people cheered.

"I want to raise your salary," said the King.

"The only rays I am interested in," replied the inventor, who had not been paying much attention to what the King was saying, "are the light-and-energy-rays. I have another idea about them which I think I can work out if you will let me have some money for my experimentation."

"You may have all the money you want!" was the King's eager answer. "But tell me one thing: What made those Yeast Men grow and move the way they did?"

"It was like this, Your Majesty. They were just yeast cells but they were filled with a special dynamic energy, a very special form of energy. I could tell you all about it, but I'm afraid it would be hard for you to follow my technical explanation."

"I know I couldn't," laughed the King. "I wish you could put that kind of energy into my people. We would win the commerce of the world. But I suppose you can do things with yeast that you can't do with human beings. Now let us go to the banquet. The people are anxious to hear you."

And Mr. Billings of the United States of America said to Rudolph Hubelaire, King of Moronia,

"I am not very good at speetchatying."



# The Headless Miller of Kobold's Keep

by Irvin Ashkenazy

*This story appeared late in 1936 in Weird Tales under the by-line of G. Garnet. That author never appeared again . . . but his story did not read like the accidental single success of a tyro writer, but read like the work of an experienced hand. But whose, if G. Garnet was indeed a pen-name? Henry Kuttner's? Robert Bloch's? It could have been either, for this strange story of horror and inbreeding could have come from expert word-weavers such as those authors. But the name that Miss McIlhenneth of Weird Tales answered our inquiry with was that of one I. Ashkenazy . . . with an address vacated a dozen years ago and no forwarding address! Then, two years after we had placed this title in our "All Hopes Abandoned" folder of our permissions file, a story was submitted free-lance to another Avon publication, a story signed Irvin Ashkenazy. Our memory clicked like a Geiger counter meeting a stray atom and we wrote him. Yes, Irvin Ashkenazy, an expert radio writer, journalist, and Hollywood penman, was our man, and "G. Garnet" a pseudonym he had used once only, before going off on a journalistic assignment that took him away from fantasy markets for many years. But we know you'll agree the story was worth the delay.*

Mr. Abiathar Hall, Purchasing Director,  
Americana Antiques, Inc., New York, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Hall:

HEREWITH tender my resignation, effective immediately.

Maybe what I have seen tonight is all in my mind. Maybe it never really happened and the events that I believe to have occurred are but morbid hallucinations. If so, then I am the victim of the maddest cacodemonia a man's mind has ever been plagued with and all the more reason why I should resign this job and stop poking my nose into strange and unholy places. I'm through!

In all fairness to you, I suppose, I should give an account of what has occurred to bring me to this decision. I find it difficult to do so. I am no occultist. I have always scoffed at tales of spirits, ghosts, devils, or other spiritual manifestations. But tonight my faith in the fundamental reasonableness of God and Nature is shaken. Perhaps, as I've suggested already, I'm mad. After reading my account I suppose you will be sure of it!

How you ever suspected the existence of Kobold's Keep, even as only a

legend, is a matter of wonder to me. It is marked on no map that I have ever seen. And I was practically on top of the place before I found anybody who'd ever heard of it.

I had dismissed the existence of Kobold's Keep as being, in fact, a legend, until one morning, while driving north along a narrow dirt road that wound among the mountains, I came to the village of Merlin.

While the attendant ministered to my gas tank at the hamlet's solitary filling station I sat back and took stock of my surroundings. The mountain peaks that serrated the skyline ahead seemed to be even loftier, craggier, more forbidding than the ones I had come over already. I wondered whether my brakes and bearings would hold out until I got to the next town. The sour-faced, close-mouthed bull-bully who was pumping gasoline into my tank didn't impress me much as a possible repair man. And neither did the old fellow, whom I took to be his assistant, who was sitting at the base of the gas pump, knees drawn up under his chin, eyes shut tight, apparently fast asleep.

The old man caught my interest. He was, to say the least, an unusual type. His long, lank, dirty gray hair fell to his shoulders in two braids, like an Indian's. His face, weather-beaten and hairless, was broad and lean, the cheekbones as prominent as a cat's, his nose thin and hooked. I was about to question the station attendant whether the old fellow wasn't a member of some Indian reservation hereabouts that I hadn't heard of, when I noticed his hair more closely. At first glance it had seemed to be a dirty gray, but I saw now that it was actually red—a faded, nondescript, pinkish red, but red, nevertheless. I'd never heard of a red-headed Indian.

The ancient, red-headed anomaly yawned. I observed a curious, crescent-shaped swelling in the center of his forehead. Its bottom border was fringed with little hairs, like misplaced eyelashes.

As if sensing my fixed stare, the old man's head lifted. I looked for his eyes to open. They seemed oddly sunken.

It was an unusually hot day. Yet, as I looked, I grew cold—cold and rigid, and a little sick; for the old man had opened his one, solitary, sky-blue eye. It was in the center of his forehead.

My horror must have been written on my face, for the old man's mouth slit in a frightful, toothless grin. I turned away hastily. . . .

Of course, I'd heard of similar cases of persons born with cyclopean eye formations as recorded in medical history. But being faced with such an individual unexpectedly, even in broad daylight, is enough to give anyone a start.

I jerked my eyes away and tried to get a grip on myself—all the while being aware of that great, bulging, sky-blue orb fixed on me in dreadful contemplation.

"Have you ever," I asked the surly-faced attendant (as I had asked at every town, village, and hamlet in the state through which I'd passed), "have you ever heard of a place hereabouts called Kobold's Keep?"

The attendant, who was screwing my radiator cap back on, looked up suddenly. He stared at me a moment; then, averting his gaze, finished what he was doing.

"Naw," he growled, and knocked a tomato can into the ditch with a ruffled stream of tobacco juice. "Never heered of it."

A nasal, cackling laugh clattered on the still air.

"Don't ye believe him, mister! He's lyin', Jim is! He's heered of the place all right!"

Torn between repulsion and a horrible fascination, I slowly turned and gazed on the dreadful face of the ancient mountain cyclops who sat by the gasoline pump. His bulging eye rolled, glistening in the bright sunlight. His toothless mouth writhed with crazy mirth.

"Don't pay him no mind," the attendant muttered sullenly. "He's crazy."

The old man slapped his thigh with a renewed spasm of hissing laughter.

"If that don't beat all! 'Don't pay him no mind,' he says! I'm outen my head, I am! What you want to be to the feller for, Jim? Tell him!" He paused, subsiding reflectively. "But you can't go thataway, mister. You gotta leave your autymobile behind. It'll take more'n gasoline to git that thing over Black Knight Pass!"

Black Knight . . . Black Knight . . . I stared at the old fellow curiously. Shockingly repulsive as he still was, most of the horror I'd experienced upon first laying eyes on him was fast evaporating. He was simply a freak. . . . But what had he just said?

"Black Knight Pass," he repeated, pronouncing the "Knight" with the old Teutonic "ch" guttural—a sound that was dropped from modern English many centuries ago. "It's the on'y way ye kin git over the ridge into the Devil's Millhop."

"Black Knight, you mean, don't you?" I said curiously.

The bulging blue eye blinked.

"Knight," the old man repeated, "Black Knight. . . . It'll take ye over into the Millhop, and there—there ye'll find the thrivin' town of Kobold's Keep!" His eldritch laughter whistled and sucked between his toothless gums.

"Ifen you listen to that loon," the attendant spat, "you're fixin' to git yourself in a peck o' trouble. You want to stay outen Kobold's Keep, brother!"

Then there *was* such a place!

"Yeah," he growled sourly. "It's there, all right. And so is hell!"

At the moment I was puzzled and irritated because of the fellow's manifest reluctance to have me go to Kobold's Keep. After all, what business was it of his? I tried to discover some reason for his attitude.

"Don't be askin' no questions and you won't be gittin' no lies," he responded discourteously. "You can't git to Kobold's Keep unless you walk or git a mule. And when you git there the main thing you'll be wantin' to do is to git out. So just drive on your way, brother, and forgit that you ever heered about the damned place!"

"But I've got to get there," I insisted. "I have business there."

One bushy black eyebrow lifted, "Business?" the mountaineer drawled incredulously. "Business in Kobold's Keep?"

"And why shouldn't he be havin' business there?" the old man cackled. "Kobold's Keep is a right smart town. Better'n this hole! Ye needn't be

a'knockin', Jim, ye scut! Kobold's Keep is one o' the finest towns in these whole mountings!"

I began to lose patience. "I have business there! Damned important business! And if I can't get there by car, then I'd just as soon leave it here and rent a horse or a mule for the trip."

"Must be gosh-awful important," the attendant muttered.

"See here," I cried, "what the devil's the matter with the place? Why are you so damned anxious to have me stay away?"

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, and spat.

"Believe it or not, mister, I'm tryin' to keep you out for your own good."

"Oh, nonsense. What is there to be afraid of?"

"Wal," he drawled, "for one thing—the people."

"The people? What's the matter with the people?"

"Yah!" the old cyclops screeched. "Ain't nothin' the matter with 'em! Don't you listen to that damn' fool, mister! The citizens o' Kobold's Keep are right fine, upstandin' citizens!" And the glistening blue eye in his forehead blinked emphatically.

The attendant swept the freak with a lowering glance. He turned to me and jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"He comes from Kobold's Keep. He's one of 'em. And he don't look so bad as the most of 'em. But that ain't the worst part."

He pulled a dirty rag out of his pocket and began to wipe the inside of my windshield.

"No?" I prompted.

"Naw," he drawled out of the corner of his mouth. "It ain't. The place is hexed. There's been a curse on it since the days when Injuns owned these mountings— afore the days o' my great gran'pappy's great gran'pappy, huncerts and huncerts o' year ago. That curse has been on it. And still is. I ain't askin' you to believe nothin', mister. I'm just tellin' you that no stranger who ever got into Kobold's Keep ever lived more'n a day after leavin' it!"

"Whut's that he's sayin'?" the old man drooled. "Is that lowdown dawg tellin' more lies about the Keep? Don't ye believe a word he says, mister! He's plumb loony, he is! Why, I'll guide ye to the Millhop myself, I will! And cheap, too!"

"You're hired!" I agreed promptly, and turned to the attendant. "Could I rent parking-space over in that shed for a couple of days?"

He shrugged. "You can. And, I reckon, you'll be wantin' a mule, too." He seemed to give up all efforts to dissuade me from visiting Kobold's Keep.

"Two mules," I corrected. "One for my guide."

He laughed shortly and with a grim significance that, at the moment, entirely escaped me.

"That'll be all right," the cyclops croaked hastily. "I won't be needin' no critter. I'd rather lead ye afoot."

"And see that he allus keeps a good ten paces away f'om the mule," the attendant growled, "or the critter'll shy and throw ye as sure as God made little ducks!"

He sauntered around to the back of his shack behind the station and

presently returned leading as ancient and weath'gone-looking a beast as I've ever seen, alive or dead. He led the blind, spavined creature to within thirty feet of the old freak when the hobbling bag of bones suddenly moored, as if he'd scented a mountain lion, reared up in terror, planted his front legs down with a crash, and refused to budge.

"Do ye git whut I mean?" the attendant leered.

Frankly, I didn't. But I could hardly afford to waste any more time trying to get around the patent stupidities of my filling-station mountaineer. I got down to business. How much did he want for the use of the mule for a couple of days? I was willing to pay a reasonable rental.

"Rents this mule?" he grinned sardonically. "I ain't rentin', mister. I'm sellin'. I ain't so sure you're coming back."

I flared with anger. Hadn't he my car as security?

He shrugged. "I'm sellin'. One hundred dollars. Take it or leave it."

It was an outrageous price to pay for that moribund animal, but it was too early to be looking around and I was too much in a hurry, anyway. I took it.

He drove my car into the shed, then got out and threw a milddewed old saddle on the mule.

"Must be moughty important business you've got in Kobold's Keep," he muttered as he tightened the cinch strap.

"You've been there, I suppose?" I ventured casually.

He looked up—shook his head slowly.

"Now, mister. Once, when I was a young sprout, I clumb to the top of the Pass and looked down into the Millhop. I could see the shacks of the place way off below. Yeah. I could even see some of the critters who live there. But I never went down to take a closer look. I got better sense."

"That doesn't sound reasonable!" I protested. "What's there to be scared of? What kind of people live there?"

He glanced at the cyclops. The great eye in the center of the freak's forehead winked weirdly, the toothless black gums showing in a lipless grin.

"Same kind as he is, I reckon. On'y this'n seems like the best-lookin' critter that ever came outen the Devil's Millhop. That's why he's still here now, I reckon. The others what tried it got kilt or chased back. There was no puttin' up with the sight of them!"

Black Knight Pass . . . the Devil's Millhop . . . Kobold's Keep . . . it all sounded like a Barnum's paradise. I guess I must have grinned, for the mountaineer scowled and I could get no further word out of him.

The cyclops hopped to his feet with surprising agility as I mounted my decrepit steed, and plunged down a steep embankment into a ravine that ran at right angles to the road. I hesitated, met the jaundiced sneer of the station attendant, then kicked the ribs of my blind mule so that he half slid, half dived down the road bank. The cyclops, turning, winked, then plunged into the woods, leading a good thirty feet or more.

Through silent, needle-cushioned pine forest, across dark and rocky mountain flanks, over verdant, flower-studded meadows the strange old fellow guided me. For all his apparent senility he was possessed of an astonishing vigor. His thin old legs skipped along with the spring and easy grace of youth.

And when the country began to grow rougher, the grassy carpet sparser, and the rocks blacker and more cruelly sharp, he negotiated the difficult terrain with the supple, careless ease of a mountain goat, while my feeble old mule gasped and heaved and forced me to dismount and struggle along beside her over the crenellated rocks.

Our progress, however, was steady, and I found times during the smoother stretches in which to ponder certain strange peculiarities that I had noticed in the natives of this part of the state—and, more particularly, the peculiarities that I had observed in the eldritch fantasist who was my guide.

That he was a hybrid of some sort I had no doubt. Probably he was a Melungeon—out of those dark people who are descendants of early English settlers who took Indian wives. Still, I had never before met one who displayed such a combination of physical degeneracy with wiry stamina. As I contemplated his skipping figure, his pale pink braids waving in the air, his ragged overalls constantly on the verge of slipping off, I couldn't help but fancy that he wasn't exactly human—that he was, really, a cloven-footed goblin, an emanation of evil possessed of the immortality and deathless strength of Satan.

I smiled to myself. That was giving my fancy entirely too much leeway. For the world to me was a reasonable place—and belief in devils, evil spirits and such I took as a matter of course to be the products of sick minds and the spawn of ignorance.

The cyclops had called the mountain we would have to cross the "Black Knight"—pronouncing it with the long unused Anglo-Saxon "ch" sound. Black Knight? Why, the word "knight" hadn't been pronounced that way since the Fourteenth Century—a hundred years before America was officially discovered!

I knew that the mountaineers inhabiting these peaks are, perhaps, the purest bred stock in all America—fair, blue-eyed folk, descended from the earliest English settlers, being born, marrying among themselves, and dying within the radius of a few miles, generation after generation. I have met many who have never yet seen a railroad train, although I suspect aircraft passing overhead have become a familiar sight by now. I have found many a treasure of furniture and brassware among their mean huts—articles inherited from father to son down through the centuries.

Yet—Black Knight! It worried me. Fourteenth Century stuff in Twentieth Century America! I concluded that the way he pronounced it must have been only a personal peculiarity.

Our ascent had become many degrees steeper. Then, quite abruptly, as we came to a looming wall of rock barring our way, the cyclops vanished. I soon discovered that he had disappeared into a narrow cleft in the raw stone—a cleft that rapidly widened into wide, though unevenly graded, road. Overhead the sky gleamed like a crooked blue ribbon and thinned the shadows within the pass so that the figure of my guiding imp was a visible, though dim, silhouette. A cold, dank wind whispered about my ears and explored my summer clothes with chill fingers. I crouched close to my mule's neck for warmth.

Suddenly the path at the bottom of the crevasse grew straighter, smoother. Far ahead I could see the walls of the cleft fall away into sky, crystal-clear, a bright background framing the black silhouette of the cyclops, standing motionless, watching me like a monstrous, one-eyed ghoul. . . .

Thoughtlessly, I let my mule have its head, and it wasn't until she suddenly snorted, reared, and flung me to the hard rock that I realized I'd let her approach the cyclops too closely. I still was seeing stars while the clattering gallop of my panic-stricken animal drummed in my ears, sounding more faintly with every hoofbeat.

I picked myself up and plodded painfully up to where the cyclops stood, his bulging eye sparkling giddily, his toothless jaws writhing in silent laughter.

We had reached the top of Black Knight Pass. I peered down and saw spread before me the panorama of the Devil's Millhop.

It resembles nothing so much as a huge black bowl with vertical sides, and almost perfectly circular. Perhaps it's as much as four miles in diameter. I could see absolutely not a single break in the great barrier of black cliffs that surround it. Then the ugly devil who was with me pointed to a precipitous path dropping away from the lip of the pass down the face of the cliff by a series of narrow, natural steps. I believe now that it's the only route by which a human being may enter or leave that frightful chasma.

The terrain of the Devil's Millhop, while showing patches of green here and there, seemed to be the same color as the rocks—basalt black. And though I scanned every section of the place, the only habitations I could discern were some curious hutches of black stones, almost invisible against the soot-like ground, grouped near the center of the bowl. A narrow waterfall splashed from the distant cliffs like a sliver of pale silver, and fed a brook coursing through the center of the Millhop. The brook, after speeding down a sink about a quarter of a mile in diameter that indented the bottom of the bowl, seemed to disappear into the ground.

"See yander?" the cyclops pointed, grinning. "In the sink, where the brook disappears . . . see, that fine black mansion?"

I strained my eyes. Sure enough. It was quite pretentious, built in the style of—a castle? Anyway, I thought I could discern turrets. There seemed to be some kind of bulky affair hanging over the spot where the brook vanished—something that seemed suspended on an axis jutting from the building.

"Oh, that!" the cyclops cackled. "That's the mill! Gran'pappy Kobolder called it the Keep. He had him a fancy house across the water that he called the Keep. So when he come here, he and his three sons they built this mill to grind the corn they larned to grow. And the ole man—he called it the Keep!" The eye winked.

"When did this happen?" Those curious stone dwellings offered food for speculation.

"Oh, long, long, long time ago, I reckon." The cyclops sat on his haunches and grinned spasmodically. "The ole folks down yander"—he jerked a thumb over his shoulder—"they sometimes mumble lies of whut *their* great, great-gran'pappy done tole 'em. Maybe some of it ain't lies, though."

The eye winked confidentially.

"Maybe it ain't a lie that Gran'pappy Kobolder was a boss man—a Knicht, they called 'em in those days. . . . Yezh—a Knicht. Funny, ain't it? He was a sinful man, murderin' and thievin'—yeah. . . . They chased him plumb outen the land over there 'cross the water . . . and he come here with a slew of people who, I reckon, had been share-croppin' on his land. I reckon it was somethin' like that. . . . They come here and settle down. . . . But all that's a moughty long time ago, I reckon. Nobody knows how long. There's an old book made o' sheephide, seems-like, down yander in the Keep. Gran'paw wrote it himself. He was full o' book-larnin', they say. A boss Knicht had to be, I reckon. But I don't figure it's in English. . . . Queerlookin' printin'. Some furrin' language they spoke in them days, I guess. . . ."

The bulging blue eye regarded me contemplatively. I must have showed my excitement.

"Whut's on your mind?" he snarled, his black gums showing.

"Who owns that property?" I asked, trying to repress my eagerness. "Who is living there now?"

The old degenerate burst into a hilarious cackle.

"'Who owns it?' he says! 'Who's livin' there now!' Hee, hee!"

I snapped, "What's so funny?"

"I'll tell you who owns it, mister! The feller that built it owns it! And the feller who built it is the feller who's still livin' in it right this very minute! It's old Robin Kobolder—the great-great-great-great-gran'pappy of us all down yander!"

I didn't press the point. The fellow, of course, was quite mad.

The glistening eye studied me avidly.

"How come you're so all-fired sot on comin' here?" he inquired. "What you so het up about Gran'pappy Kobold and his ole mill?"

I explained as patiently as I could that I might buy it if the price was right. Now that I was completely recovered and rested I was on pins and needles to be moving down before night overtook us.

The huge blue eye rolled with high humor.

"Let's get going," I broke into his cackling.

He scampered down the side of the precipice as nimbly as any lemur. Evidently he knew every step, ridge and cranny by heart. I followed slowly, laboriously, clinging to the wall with trepidation, averting my eyes from the sheer drop below me, yet considering at the same time that it would require careful preparation and much delicate work with block and tackle to remove any possible purchase I might make in this strange crater.

When I got to the bottom I paused, sniffing disgustedly, for the smell of the ground was utterly fetid. I scuffed the soil with my boot, picked up a handful. It was loose, granular and flinty, reeking with an unpleasant chemical caecostmia. No wonder vast stretches of this bottom land were dark and barren. No possible thing might grow in it. Perhaps in some ancient day this had been the mouth of a monster volcano that had spewed up poisonous substances which, even today, carried the breath of death. . . .

A silence covered the valley like a choking blanket of dark swan's-down.



An invisible cap seemed to seal the hole in the ground hermetically against the murmurs of life outside—the whisper of summer breezes, the song of birds, the rustle of trees. But as we strode toward the cluster of stone hutches on the farther side of the bowl I began to distinguish the sound of the water fall—echoing and re-echoing like water splashing inside a bass drum. It accentuated the silence by its very solitude.

When I had viewed them from a distance I could have sworn I'd seen men moving about among the black stone hutches, but, as we approached, they appeared to be strangely deserted. The houses, thrown crudely together, were shockingly primitive and foul. They squatted in aimless clusters like a colony of filthy black bugs. The rock, I surmised, was their sole source of building material. As far as I could see, not a tree existed anywhere in this monstrous bowl. In fact, the only green things I saw growing were the infrequent garden patches that grew in hummocks of what was, quite evidently, imported soil.

The cyclops halted before one of the larger hutches.

"Funnel!" he screeched. "Open up, ye blabbermouth scound'el! It's me, Glan!"

There was no reply. Perhaps it was my nerves—but I could not escape the feeling that I was being watched; that eyes—many pairs of eyes—were peering at me covertly; eyes glinting from between stone chinks—peering from around corners. . . . I could catch fleeting glimpses of bodies from out of the corner of my eye now and then, but whenever I turned quickly there was—nothing.

Enraged, the cyclops was kicking the tall slate slab that served as a door. And presently, slowly, inch by inch, the slab began to move outward. The cyclops stepped back, his huge blue eye blazing with wrath. A creature stuck its head out and peered at us.

I cannot adequately describe it. I can only say that Horror stared from that misshapen, rat-eared head. It was the head and face of a being scarcely three feet tall, capped with a matted bush of filthy black furze that straggled into the squinting, Mongoloid eyes. The creature had no nose. From where the nose was supposed to be the face shot out horizontally in a ghastly anastomosis of the bone, both jaws opening forward and outward, the green-yellow fangs protruding beyond the lips like the mouth of a misshapen banshee.

"Get outen the door!" the cyclops screeched, and advancing a pace, grabbed the creature by the hair and jerked it out.

The tiny gargoyle had virtually no body at all. Its huge, chinless head sloped down to a scrawny infant's torso, a pair of crooked match-stick legs, and two tiny clubbed feet. Its bent toes and tiny fingers were webbed.

"That's Funnel," the cyclops said, nodding to the creature.

Glancing at the monstrous mouth, I understood the name. He stood there in the muted light, eyeing me, motionless. I stared a moment as the cyclops entered the foul-smelling hutch. Each slanting eye of the creature contained two beady pupils.

Within the rocky hutch a perpetual twilight reigned. The light filtered through the cracks and crevices between the slabs of the rock. In the center

of the room was a table made of a single slab of slate supported by a block of hewn granite. Smaller blocks served as chairs. On the table were a broken clay crock and several clay mugs.

I followed the cyclops' example and sat down at the table. He poured a dark, heavy odored liquor into two of the mugs and handed me one. I watched him drain his, then sniffed at mine. A rather sweetish, though flat, scent.

The bulging blue eye winked confidentially.

"Not bad, eh?" He smacked his lips and filled his mug again. "We make a ouien honey. It goes down even better'n White Mule."

I tasted it—and was rather shaken by its strength. A hazy memory floated around the inner depths of my mind . . . the memory of tales of ancient Cornish feasting halls, where warriors rolled under the benches, drunk with a fermented liquor made of honey, water, and spices. . . . They called it mead. . . .

Idiozy winthed in the freak's gibbering mouth.

"Ole Gran'pappy Kobolder—we call him Kobold for short—wal, he ~~was~~ the one who first mixed the first mashpot full of this stuff. He mixed it up in Cornwall, and up in the fur North Country—and then he brought the idear with him here. He was a smart bugger, he was!"

My skin prickled.

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

But he didn't hear, apparently. And, presently, I remarked on the shyness of the populace around here.

The cyclops agreed. "They ain't used to visitors," he explained. "Shucks, the last time anybody come herabouts was—wal, come to think of it, it was exactly a year ago to this very day. It were an old priest, I remember. Yeah. He crawled down Black Knight and began prayin' for his salvation when he seen some of the ugly scound'els around here! I reckon he figured he'd come to an outcrop of Satan's kingdom!"

And the cyclops laughed with huge, nasal mirth, his rolling eye crinkling at the corners.

"I showed him around. Yeah. I took the holy scound'el down to the Keep itself! I showed him the furniture, the things that's been lyn' around untouched for humnerts and humnerts of years. Yeah. . . . But when I showed him Gran'pappy's ole book, blamed if the rascal didn't claim that it was a fake!"

"A fake?"

"Yeah. The blamed ole fool claimed that Gran'pappy never wrote it. Said it was a Bible printed by some feller named Caxton!"

You can understand how I thrilled to my very soul. A Bible by Caxton! William Caxton, date—1477! I realized that I was on the verge of a priceless discovery.

There was a stealthy scuffling of footfalls just outside the walls of the hutch—I'd been aware of them for several minutes now. I could almost feel the eyes peering at me through the chinks and envision the shapeless monstrosities crowding about the hutch to spy on me—to listen. My horror and

disgust were giving way now to a misty sort of pity. Poor, hopeless, Godforsaken wretches! They were so desperately frightened of, yet hungry for, contact with the outside world. But, I sighed to myself, better that they stay here, unknown and unmolested. The milk of human kindness ran thin throughout the world. . . . Once I thought I heard a sound in the rear of the room—the dark threshold of what was probably a sleeping-chamber.

"Gran'pappy didn't cotton to that priest none," the cyclops was mouthing again. "When mornin' come, damn often we didn't find that priest lyin' in the door of the main room in the mill. His head was chopped clean off."

"Gran'pappy?" I repeated stupidly.

"Shore. Gran'pappy Kobold. He didn't like that old priest. He chopped his head off!" He grinned more hideously than ever, and edged a little closer toward me. "Though, jes' between you and me, stranger, maybe the old priest stumbled against the door jamb under which Gran'pappy's ax-head is hangin', and the shakin' made it fall so that it hit the priest in the neck and killed him. . . . Sull"—he shrugged—"ye can't tell about sperrits. They say that them what see's Gran'pappy's sperrit walkin' dies on the spot. Or, anyways, within twenty-four hours. It ain't never tailed yit, nuster!"

I pressed him for details about Grandfather Kobolder.

He grinned nauseatingly, winked, and leaned forward.

"He was the Knicht. The big boss man. But he was gittin' old—old and the cold was creepin' into his bones. He began catchin' young uns when their mamamies weren't lookin'—and then cuttin' off their hands and drinkin' their blood. It kept him young, it did. Mebbe, if they'd let him alone, he could live for ever thataway. . . ." The lipless mouth receded from the black, gangrenous gums. "But no—they drove him off. He and his three sons and his three daughters had to skedaddle for their lives! They come here . . . they settled down. . . ."

The cyclops filled his mug and drained it at a gulp, his eye shining bright.

"Yeah," he rasped, "but soon the cold come again. . . . The ole man needed blood. He tried to get his youngest son—but the scound'el took the knife away from him, stabbed him dead, cut off his hand, scalped him, and hung it at the belt. The murderin' whelp!"

I stared, transfixed at the glaring rage suddenly contorting that evil face. It subsided slowly.

"You," I ventured timidly, "you are all his descendants?"

"Yeah. His chillen ma'ied 'mongst themselves, and *their* chillen ma'ied 'mongst themselves, I reckon. Later on mebbe there was an Injun gal or two to mix with. But not often. It's been mostly—jest us!"

My gorge rose. These amorphous creatures, a self-sustaining breed of compounded insects, had miraculously existed century after century through deepening shadows of insanity, through successive generations of horror and deformity, alone, shunned by the world, isolated from civilization, fit only for death!

A sudden weird mewling in the next room snatched up my shocked attention. I stared at the opening of the chamber. My eyes slowly lowered to the Thing that appeared on the floor.

Rolling, squirming, writhing its way out of the opening was a naked, armless, legless, eyeless, earless Thing. It paused on the threshold, as if it sensed our presence, mewed once, like a frightened kitten, then continued its weirdly painful progress until it reached the door. The cyclops got up, opened the door, and it rolled out.

I rose, nauseated. Through the wide-open doorway I could see that the shadows had lengthened considerably; that, in fact, time had passed so swiftly that it was nearly twilight. The idea of spending the night here, which I'd originally entertained, now left me trembling.

"Let's get on down to the Keep!" I cried. "Let's get on down. I want to see these things, buy them if I can, and leave!"

The cyclops licked the edge of his mouth with a thick, coal-black tongue. I shoved some bills into his hand and we both sallied forth into the deepening dusk, walking briskly to the brook and following it down into the sink.

"Buy them!" the cyclops kept hissing to himself with thoughtful glee. "Buy them—and leave!" He seemed to mouth the words as if they tasted good.

As we approached the old mill I was struck with the similarity of its design to that of several old castles of Norman vintage that I had seen in England. The silent mill-wheel hung motionless on its broken, rust-eaten axis, the swift waters of the stream breaking about it futilely. As we came more closely toward the old mill house I was struck by the strength of the chemical vapors that swirled into my nostrils. I stopped, halt suffocated.

The cyclops clutched my arm, grinning.

"Come on," he snarled, "come on."

We stumbled to the bottom of that dank, mephitic pit, waded across the brook, and stepped across the threshold into the open doorway of Kobold's Keep.

Its interior was a revelation. Though laden and crusted with filth, everything was, perhaps, as the owner had left it unknown centuries ago. The spacious chambers were timbered with Gothic arches and ornamented with gargoyles of wood. The furniture was of an undetermined period. Certainly it antedated any of the so-called "period" furniture that we recognize today—and antedated it, I'll swear, by centuries. As I shuffled through the strange and ancient old house a feeling that was nearly awe encompassed me. If the story of old Robin Kobolder's voyage to the New World could be authenticated a new chapter would be added to American history!

At first I was suspicious of the extraordinary state of preservation of the woodwork and, especially, of certain stiff damask draperies I saw still hanging there. I am now convinced, however, that these objects are entirely authentic. And the most reasonable conjecture I can offer as to their preservation is that the strong chemical exhalations rising from the ground have served as an effective bactericide, halting the process of decomposition through the centuries.

Presently I found myself in a large, nearly empty room, whose paneless windows gaped upon the creaking mill wheel and the yawning pit into which the brook vanished. It had been, apparently, an armorer's workshop. A few blades of ancient design and all rust yet hung precariously on the walls.

Glancing about, I perceived the huge bronze blade of a battle-ax hanging, edge downward like a guillotine, over the lintel of the door I had just entered. A black stain crusted the greater part of its surface.

A splintering crash!

I spun around, my heart beating wildly. The cyclops stood there, grinning at me, winking that ghastly eye of his. But when I saw what he had done my fright gave way to swift anger. He'd smashed one of those priceless chairs to fragments!

"You damned fool!" I yelled. "What did you do that for?" And, like a hen gathering in a lost chick, I fell on my knees and gathered together the pieces of the chair tenderly.

The cyclops shrugged. "We'll be needin' a fire, I reckon. We gotta have firewood!"

An authentic Fifteenth Century chair—firewood!

I warned him to keep his hands off the furniture while I prowled about.

The book lay on a huge work table near the center of the room. It was a Bible, all right—a Caxton Bible! My eyes devoured its priceless pages, my fingers infinitely tender, infinitely reverent. God! To find such a treasure in this dismal, miasmic hole, alone, uncared for!

Suddenly I was aware of the crackle of flames. I glanced up—leaped to my feet with an oath.

The deformed wretch had built a fire on the ancient hearth with the broken pieces of the chair!

I aimed a blow at his blinking eye, but he ducked and skipped away nimbly, hissing like a frightened adder. But the flames had completely engulfed the fragments. It was too late to save them. . . . The dancing flames painted, eery chiaroscuros of scarlet light and stygian shadows on the walls.

I was suddenly aware how late it had grown. So engrossed had I been in the book that night had already slipped over the Devil's Millhop like a swift-flowing black melena, catching me unawares.

To be forced to spend the night in this mephitic hermitage was no pleasant prospect. But the book provided consolation. I sat cross-legged on the floor near the fire, and read it slowly, critically, picking my way, as you may well imagine, with sheerest delight through its ornate typography.

The cyclops sat on his haunches beside me, his glistening eye pondering the flames hungrily.

How long I sat there wading through the pages of Caxton's Bible I cannot say. Suddenly I was aware of a strange sound—a squeaking and a thrashing, as of badly greased machinery stirring to activity. Simultaneously there came a slow, crunching, grinding sound that shook the house in every rafter. It seemed to come from directly beneath me.

I leaped to my feet, scuttled to the window and peered out.

The ancient mill-wheel was turning! Slowly, at first, it began to pick up speed even as I stared and soon was spinning industriously, the blinding moonlight catching the spray dancing from its paddles like spume of liquid silver.

Puzzled and, I must admit, scared by this inexplicable event, I turned to

the cyclops—and found him on his feet, facing me, a long, curving blade of oriental design clenched in one fist.

"Where did you get that?" I rasped, startled.

"Funny thing," he grinned horribly, "but it was a-lym' right there where I was a scum."

The firelight scintillated on the bright steel. "It doesn't look so very old," I commented, more to myself than anyone else.

The black gums bared. "I reckon it ain't so old. Only a mite over four hundred years, I reckon. This is the knife that old Kobold's whelp used to sculp his old dad—and to cut off his hair! Feel that edge."

He extended the blade to me. I drew back.

The cyclops cackled mockingly. "Gran'paw Kobold, he warn't feared of man nor devil!" The eye winked confidentially. "He'd as soon slit your throat as look at ye. That's the kind of man *he* was! Iron-fisted! He couldn't be puttin' up with the law. 'Cause he was the law himself! That's why he come across the water. Not that he wanted to much, I reckon!" His laugh rattled through the room like loose bones. "But y' can't do much when the Devil sends a storm that blows ye across!"

The cyclops laughed hissing and spat into the fire. His gaze swung back to my face with a sudden intensity.

"But, like I tole ye, he was a-needin' new blood . . . new blood. . . . The cold was a-creepin' into his bones." His taloned fingers curved and slowly clenched.

As I stared into that writhing face glistening with sweat, it seemed to take on a glow, an uncanny, greenish aura. The slack chin seemed to strengthen, to grow heavier, and in those grotesque, shriveled features burned a mad, brutal virility!

"But they caught him one night!" The cyclops' voice clattered with a harsh note of fury. A chill malaise crept over me as I stared into that terrible visage. "They caught him!" the cyclops snarled. "They caught him and drove him out! And we run, my boys and my three daughters—we run! And then——"

The great burning eye closed slowly. And as I stared in sick horror it seemed that it was not really an eye at all. No—no eye at all, but a swollen scar—a scar from whose ends stretched two finer, dead-white lines that completely encircled the base of his scalp—the mark of the scalper's knife!

"The young scound'el stabbed me!" the horror roared in a strange, deep voice—a voice that I heard as if through a vast stretch of space and time. "He stabbed me!" he screamed madly.

I stared into the sunken blank walls of flesh covering the eysockets. And, even as I stared, they lifted and I was gazing into a pair of mad, burning, red-rimmed eyes.

The knife flashed, and before my very eyes the creature had slashed his own throat, sawing the knife back and forth until the head dropped off, hit the floor, and rolled across the boards. I stared at it as if in a dream. I remember vividly an instant of crowning horror when the head, as it came to rest on the floor, looking at me, closed one eye in a ribald wink.

How I got out of that accursed house, across the moonlit crater, up the face

of the cliff, and back to civilization is a confused nightmare of terror and madness. I can recall only flashes of my mad flight—the gibing creaking of the spinning millwheel, the dull crash of some heavy object as I fled from the room—an object that brushed my coat-tails as I passed under the door-lintel—the goblin laughter of the brook, the searing pain of my hands and knees as I tore them on the cruel cliff rocks, the very moonlight sifting through a forest . . . gasping, stumbling, falling, plunging forward—ever forward . . . and, by some unfathomed miracle, the vision of a road sign which read in the bright moonlight: "You Are Now Entering the City of Merlin. Go slow."

I woke up the filling-station keeper. He didn't seem very surprised to see me. His jaundiced grin swept me once; then, not waiting to hear my gasping explanations, he led me to a room—the room I am writing this letter in. . . .

It's no use trying to sleep. Sleep takes me back there. . . . The eye of the cyclops . . . the bleeding head . . . the ribald wink. . . .

If all these things are but the figments of a diseased mentality then I suppose I should be put away. . . . Maybe they didn't happen. . . . Maybe I'm crazy. . . .

I see dawn breaking over the hills. As soon as it gets a bit lighter I'm going to post this letter via the first bus.

Then I'm going to get in my car and drive like mad out of this accursed country!

Faithfully yours,

ROBERT DARNLEY.

\* \* \* \* \*

The following newspaper clipping was included by Mr. Abiathar Hall with the manuscript of Mr. Darnley's letter:

May 5, 1936—The body of a man believed to be Robert Darnley, a professional art collector was found in the wreckage of his automobile about three miles north of Merline, Tenn. The car, which had sheared off a number of telegraph poles, had evidently been traveling at a high rate of speed. Glass from the shattered windshield had completely disfigured the body.

# The Shadows

by Henry S. Whitehead

*Though close to the mainland, the Virgin Islands are one of the least familiar possessions of the United States. Familiar that is in the sense that Hawaii with its pineapples and hula dancers has become familiar to Americans. Yet these Caribbean islands have a most colorful and varied history. Under many flags, under pirate chiefs and European monarchs, French and English and Danish . . . with primitive Indian and jungle African legendry for a foundation for the various imported super-structures, the Virgin Islands offer a unique and fertile field for the connoisseur of the uncanny. The late Reverend Whitehead, one-time missionary, presents in this story one of the host of exotic yarns that grow so strongly in the dusky tropic sun of the Spanish Main.*

IDID not begin to see the shadows until I had lived in Old Morris' house for more than a week. Old Morris, dead and gone these many years, had been the scion of a still earlier Irish settler in Santa Cruz, of a family which had come into the island when the Danes, failing to colonize its rich acres, had opened it, in the middle of the Eighteenth Century, to colonists; and younger sons of Irish, Scottish, and English gentry had taken up sugar estates and commenced that baronial life which lasted for a century and which declined after the abolition of slavery and the German bounty on beet sugar had started the long process of West Indian commercial decadence. Mr. Morris' youth had been spent in the French islands.

The shadows were at first so vague that I attributed them wholly to the slight weakness which began to affect my eyes in early childhood, and which, while never materially interfering with the enjoyment of life in general, had necessitated the use of glasses when I used my eyes to read or write. My first experience of them was about one o'clock in the morning. I had been at a "Gentlemen's Party" at Hacker's house, "Emerald," as some poetic-minded ancestor of Hacker's had named the family estate three miles out of Christianssted, the northerly town, built on the site of the ancient abandoned French town of Bassin.

I had come home from the party and was undressing in my bedroom, which is one of two rooms on the westerly side of the house which stands at the edge of the old "Sunday Market." These two bedrooms open on the marketplace, and I had chosen them, rather than the more airy rooms on the other side, because of the space outside. I like to look out on trees in the early morn-



ings, whenever possible, and the ancient market-place is overshadowed with the foliage of hundred-year-old mahogany trees, and a few gnarled "oubaheies" and Chinese-bean trees.

I had nearly finished undressing, had noted that my servant had let down and properly fastened the mosquito netting, and had stepped into the other bedroom to open the jalousies so that I might get as much of the night-breeze as possible circulating through the house. I was coming back through the doorway between the two bedrooms, and taking off my dressing gown at the moment when the first faint perception of what I have called "the shadows" made itself apparent. It was very dark, just after switching off the electric light in that front bedroom. I had, in fact, to feel for the doorway. In this I experienced some difficulty, and my eyes had not fully adjusted themselves to the thin starlight seeping in through the slatted jalousies of my own room when I passed through the doorway and groped my way toward the great mahogany four-poster in which I was about to lie down for my belated rest.

I saw the nearest post looming before me, closer than I had expected. Putting out my hand, I grasped—nothing. I winked in some surprise, and peered through the slightly increasing light, as my eyes adjusted themselves to the sudden change. Yes, surely,—there was the corner of the bedstead just in front of my face! By now my eyes were sufficiently attuned to the amount of light from outside to see a little plainer. I was puzzled. The bed was not where I had supposed it to be. What could have happened? That the servants should have moved my bed without orders to do so was incredible. Besides, I had undressed, in full electric light in that room, not more than a few minutes ago, and then the bed was standing exactly where it had been since I had had it moved into that room a week before. I kicked gently, before me with a slipped foot, against the place where that bedpost appeared to be standing—and my foot met no resistance.

I stepped over to the light in my own room, and snapped the button. In the sudden glare, everything, readjusted itself to normal. There stood my bed, and here in their accustomed places about the room were ranged the chairs, the polished wardrobe (we do not use cupboards in the West India Islands), the mahogany dressing table,—even my clothes which I had hung over a chair where Albertina my servant would find them in the morning and put them (they were of white drill) into the soiled clothes bag in the morning.

I shook my head. Light and shadow in these islands seem, somehow, different from what they are at home in the United States! The tricks they play are different tricks, somehow.

I snapped off the light again, and in the ensuing dead blackness, I crawled in under the loose edge of the mosquito netting, tacked it along under the edge of the mattress on that side, adjusted my pillows and the sheets, and settled myself for a good sleep. Even to a moderate man, these gentlemen's parties are rather wearing sometimes. They invariably last too long. I closed my eyes and was asleep before I could have put these last ideas into words.

In the morning the recollection of the experience with the bed-being-in-the-wrong place was gone. I pumped out of bed and into my shower bath at half-

past six, for I had promised O'Brien, captain of the U. S. Marines, to go out with him to the rifle range at La Grande Princesse that morning and look over the butts with him. I like O'Brien, and I am not uninterested in the efficiency of Uncle Sam's Marines, but my chief objective was to watch the pelicans. Out there on the glorious beach of Estate Grande Princesse ("Big Princess" as the Black People call it), a colony of pelicans make their home, and it is a never-ending source of amusement to me to watch them fish. A Caribbean pelican is probably the most graceful flier we have in these latitudes,—barring not even the hurricane bird, that describer of noble arcs and parabolas,—and the most insanely, absurdly awkward creature on land that Providence has cared in a light-hearted moment to create!

I expressed my interest in Captain O'Brien's latest improvements, and while he was talking shop to one of his lieutenants and half a dozen enlisted men he has camped out there, I slipped down to the beach to watch the pelicans fish. Three or four of them were describing curves and turns of indescribable complexity and perfect grace over the green water of the reef-enclosed white beach. Ever and again one would stop short in the air, fold himself up like a jackknife, turn head downward, his great pouched bill extended like the head of a cruel spear, and drop like a plummet into the water, emerging an instant later with the pouch distended with a fish.

I stayed a trifle too long,—for my eyes. Driving back I observed that I had picked up several sun-spots, and when I arrived home I polished a set of yellowish sun-spectacles I keep for such emergencies and put them on.

The east side of the house had been shaded against the pouring morning sunlight, and in this double shade I looked to see my eyes clear up. The sun-spots persisted, however, in that annoying, recurrent way they have,—almost disappearing and then returning in undiminished kaleidoscopic grotesqueness,—those strange blocks and parcels of pure color changing as one winks from indigo to brown and from brown to orange and then to a blinding turquoise blue, according to some very natural law of physics, within the fluids of the eye itself.

The sun-spots were so persistent that morning that I decided to keep my eyes closed for some considerable time and see if that would allow them to run their course and wear themselves out. Blue and mauve grotesques of the vague, general shape of diving pelicans swam and jumped inside my eyes. It was very annoying. I called to Albertina.

"Albertina," said I, when she had come to the door, "please go into my bedroom and close all the jalousies tight. Keep out all the light you can, please."

"Ahl might, sir," replied the obedient Albertina, and I heard her slapping the jalousie-blinds together with sharp little clicks.

"De jalousie ahl close, sir," reported Albertina. I thanked her, and proceeded with half-shut eyes into the bedroom, which, not yet invaded with afternoon's sunlight and closely shuttered, offered an appearance of deep twilight. I lay, face down, across the bed, a pillow under my face, and my eyes buried in darkness.

Very gradually, the diving pelican faded out, to a cube, to a dim, recurrent

blur, to nothingness. I raised my head and rolled over on my side, placing the pillow back where it belonged. And as I opened my eyes on the dim room, there stood, in taint, shadowy outline, in the opposite corner of the room, away from the outside wall on the market place side, the huge, Danish bedstead I had vaguely noted the night before, or rather, early that morning.

It was the most curious sensation, looking at that bed in the dimness of the room. I was reminded of those fourth-dimensional tales which are so popular nowadays, for the bed impinged, spatially, on my large bureau, and the curious thing was that I could see the bureau at the same time! I rubbed my eyes, a little unwisely, but not enough to bring back the pelican sun spots into them, for I remembered and desisted pretty promptly. I looked, fixedly, at the great bed, and it blurred and dimmed and faded out of my vision.

Again, I was greatly puzzled, and I went over to where it seemed to stand and walked through it,—it being no longer visible to my now restored vision, free of the effects of the sun spots,—and then I went out into the "hall"—a West Indian drawing room is called "the hall"—and sat down to think over this strange phenomenon. I could not account for it. It had been poor Prentice, now! Prentice attended all the "gentlemen's parties" to which he was invited with a kind of religious regularity, and had to be helped into his car with a similar regularity, a regularity which was verging on the monotonous nowadays, as the invitations became more and more strained. No,—in my case it was, if there was anything certain about it, assuredly not the effects of strong liquors, for barring an occasional sociable swizzle I retained here in my West Indian residence my American convictions that moderation in such matters was a reasonable virtue. I reasoned out the matter of the phantom bedstead,—for so I was already thinking of it,—as far as I was able. That it was a phantom of defective eyesight I had no reasonable doubt. I had had my eyes examined in New York three months before, and the oculist had pleased me greatly by assuring me that there were no visible indications of deterioration. In fact, Dr. Jusseland had said at that time that my eyes were stronger, sounder, than when he had made his last examination six months before.

Perhaps this conviction,—that the appearance was due to my own physical shortcoming—accounts for the fact that I was not (what shall I say?) *disturbed*, by what I saw, or thought I saw. Confront the most thoroughgoing materialist with a ghost, and he will act precisely like anyone else; like any normal human being who believes in the material world as the outward and visible sign of something which animates it. All normal human beings, it seems to me, are sacramentalists!

I was, for this reason, able to think clearly about the phenomenon. My mind was not clouded and bemused with fear, and its known physiological effects. I can, quite easily, record what I "saw" in the course of the next few days. The bed was clearer to my vision and apprehension than it had been. It seemed to have grown in visibility; in a kind of substantialness, if there is such a word! It appeared more *material* than it had before, less shadowy.

I looked about the room and saw other furniture: a huge, old-fashioned mahogany bureau with men's heads carved on the knuckles of the front legs,

Danish fashion. There is precisely such carving on pieces in the museum in Copenhagen, they tell me, those who have seen my drawing of it. I was actually able to do that, and had completed a kind of plan-picture of the room, putting in all the shadow-furniture, and leaving my own, actual furniture out. Thank the God in whom I devoutly believe,—and know to be more powerful than the Powers of Evil,—I was able to finish that rather elaborate drawing before . . . Well, I must not "run ahead of my story."

That night when I was ready to retire, and had once more opened up the jalousies of the front bedroom, and had switched off the light, I looked, naturally enough under the circumstances, for the outlines of that ghostly furniture. They were much clearer now. I studied them with a certain sense of almost "scientific" detachment. It was, even then, apparent to me that no weakness of the strange complexity which is the human eye could reasonably account for the presence of a well-defined set of mahogany furniture in a room already furnished with real furniture! But I was by now sufficiently accustomed to it to be able to examine it all without that always disturbing element of fear,—strangeness. I looked at the bedstead and the "roll-back" chairs, and the great bureau, and a ghostly, huge, and quaintly carved wardrobe, studying their outlines, noting their relative positions. It was on that occasion that it occurred to me that it would be of interest to make some kind of drawing of them. I looked the harder after that, fixing the details and the relations of them all in my mind, and then I went into the hall and got some paper and a pencil and set to work.

It was hard work, this of reproducing something which I was well aware was some kind of an "apparition," especially after looking at the furniture in the dark bedroom, switching on the light in another room and then trying to reproduce. I could not, of course, make a direct comparison. I mean it was impossible to look at my drawing and then look at the furniture. There was always a necessary interval between the two processes. I persisted through several evenings, and even for a couple of evenings fell into the custom of going into my bedroom in the evening's darkness, looking at what was there, and then attempting to reproduce it. After five or six days, I had a fair plan, in considerable detail, of the arrangement of this strange furniture in my bedroom,—a plan or drawing which would be recognizable if there were anyone now alive who remembered such an arrangement of such furniture. It will be apparent that a story had been growing up in my mind, or, at least, that I had come to some kind of conviction that what I "saw" was a reproduction of something that had once existed in that same detail and that precise order!

On the seventh night, there came an interruption.

I had, by that time, finished my work, pretty well. I had drawn the room as it would have looked with that furniture in it, and had gone over the whole with India ink, very carefully. As a drawing, the thing was finished, so far as my indifferent skill as a draftsman would permit.

That seventh evening, I was looking over the appearance of the room, such qualms as the eeriness of the situation might have otherwise produced reduced to next-to-nothing partly by my interest, in part by having become ac-

customed to it all. I was making, this evening, as careful a comparison as possible between my remembered work on paper and the detailed appearance of the room. By now, the furniture stood out clearly, in a kind of light of its own which I can roughly compare only to "phosphorescence." It was not, quite, that. But that will serve, lame as it is, and trite perhaps, to indicate what I mean. I suppose the appearance of the room was something like what a cat "sees" when she arches her back,—as Algernon Blackwood has pointed out, in *John Silence*,—and rubs against the imaginary legs of some personage entirely invisible to the man in the armchair who idly wonders what has taken possession of his house-pet.

I was, as I say, studying the detail. I could not find that I had left out anything salient. The detail was, too, quite clear now. There were no blurred outlines as there had been on the first few nights. My own, material furniture had, so to speak, sunk back into invisibility, which was sensible enough, seeing that I had put the room in as nearly perfect darkness as I could, and there was no moon to interfere, those nights.

I had run my eyes all around it, up and down the twisted legs of the great bureau, along the carved ornamentation of the top of the wardrobe, along the lines of the chairs, and had come back to the bed. It was at this point of my checking-up that I got what I must describe as the first "shock" of the entire experience.

Something moved, beside the bed.

I peered, carefully, straining my eyes to catch what it might be. It had been something bulky, a slow-moving object, on the far side of the bed, blurred, somewhat, just as the original outlines had been blurred in the beginning of my week's experience. The now strong and clear outlines of the bed, and what I might describe as its ethereal substance, stood between me and it. Besides, the vision of the slow-moving mass was further obscured by a ghostly mosquito-net, which had been one of the last of the details to come into the scope of my strange night-vision.

Those folds of the mosquito-netting moved,—waved, before my eyes.

Someone, it might almost be imagined, was getting into that bed!

I sat, petrified. This was a bit too much for me. I could feel the little chills run up and down my spine. My scalp prickled. I put my hands on my knees, and pressed hard. I drew several deep breaths. "All-overish" is an old New England expression, once much used by spinsters, I believe, resident in that intellectual section of the United States. Whatever the precise connotation of the term, that was the way I felt. I could feel the reactive sensation, I mean, of that particular portion of the whole experience, in every part of my being,—body, mind, and soul! It was,—paralyzing. I reached up a hand that was trembling violently,—I could barely control it, and the fingers, when they touched the hard rubber button, felt numb,—and switched on the bedroom light, and spent the next ten minutes recovering.

That night, when I came to retire, I dreaded,—actually dreaded,—what might come to my vision when I snapped off the light. That, however, I managed to reason out with myself. I used several arguments—nothing had so far occurred to annoy or injure me; if this were to be a cumulative experience, if

something were to be "revealed" to me by this deliberate process of slow materialization which had been progressing for the last week or so, then it might as well be for some good and useful purpose. I might be, in a sense, the agent of Providence! If it were otherwise; if it were the evil work of some diabolical spirit, or something of the sort, well, every Sunday since my childhood, in church, I had recited the Creed, and so admitted, along with the clergy and the rest of the congregation, that God our Father had created all things,—visible and invisible! If it were this part of His creation at work, for any purpose, then He was stronger than they. I said a brief prayer before turning off that light, and put my trust in Him. It may appear to some a bit old-fashioned,—even Victorian! But He does not change along with the current fashions of human thought about Him, and this "human thought," and "the modern mind," and all the rest of it, does not mean the vast, the overwhelming majority of people. It involves only a few dozen prideful "intellectuals" at best, or worst!

I switched off the light, and, already clearer, I saw what must have been Old Morris, getting into bed.

I had interviewed old Mr. Bonesteel, the chief government surveyor, a gentleman of parts and much experience, a West Indian born on this island. Mr. Bonesteel, in response to my guarded enquiries,—for I had, of course, already suspected Old Morris; was not my house still called his?—had stated that he remembered Old Morris well, in his own remote youth. His description of that personage and this apparition tallied. This, undoubtedly, was Old Morris. That it was *someone*, was apparent. I felt, somehow, rather relieved to realize that it was he. I knew something about him, you see. Mr. Bonesteel had given me a good description and many anecdotes, quite freely, and as though he enjoyed being called on for information about one of the old-timers like Morris. He had been more reticent, guarded, in fact, when I pressed him for details of Morris' end. That there had been some obscurity,—intentional or otherwise, I could never ascertain,—about the old man, I had already known. Such casual enquiries as I had made on other occasions through natural interest in the person whose name still clung to my house sixty years or more since he had lived in it, had never got me anywhere. I had only gathered what Mr. Bonesteel's more ample account corroborated: that Morris had been eccentric, in some ways, amusingly so. That he had been extraordinarily well-to-do. That he gave occasional large parties, which, contrary to the custom of the hospitable island of St. Croix, were always required to come to a conclusion well before midnight. Why, there was a story of Old Morris almost literally getting rid of a few reluctant guests, by one device or another, from those parties, a circumstance on which hinged several of the amusing anecdotes of that eccentric person!

Old Morris, as I knew, had not always lived on St. Croix. His youth had been spent in Martinique, in the then smaller and less important town of Fort de-France. That, of course, was many years before the terrific calamity of the destruction of St. Pierre had taken place, by the eruption of Mt. Pelée. Old Morris, coming to St. Croix in young middle age,—forty-five or thereabouts,—had already been accounted a rich man. He had been engaged in no

business. He was not a planter, not a storekeeper, had no profession. Where he produced his affluence was one of the local mysteries. His age, it seemed, was the other.

"I suppose," Mr. Bonesteel had said, "that Morris was nearer a hundred than ninety, when he,—ah,—died. I was a child of about eight at that time. I shall be seventy next August month. That, you see, would be about sixty-two years ago, about 1861, or about the time your Civil War was beginning. Now my father has told me,—he died when I was nineteen,—that Old Morris looked exactly the same when he was a boy! Extraordinary. The Black People used to say—" Mr. Bonesteel fell silent, and his eyes had an old man's dim, far-away look.

"The Black People have some very strange beliefs, Mr. Bonesteel," said I, attempting to prompt him. "A good many of them I have heard about myself, and they interest me very much. What particular—"

Mr. Bonesteel turned his mild, blue eyes upon me, reflectively.

"You must drop in at my house one of these days, Mr. Stewart," said he, mildly. "I have some rare old rum that I'd be glad to have you sample, sir! There's not much of it on the island these days, since Uncle Sam turned his prohibition laws loose on us in 1922."

"Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Bonesteel," I replied. "I shall take the first occasion to do so, sir; not that I care especially for 'old rum' except a spoonful in a cup of tea, or in pudding sauce, perhaps; but the pleasure of your company, sir, is always an inducement."

Mr. Bonesteel bowed to me gravely, and I returned his bow from where I sat in his airy office in Government House.

"Would you object to mentioning what that 'belief' was, sir?"

A slightly pained expression replaced my old friend's look of hospitality.

"All that is a lot of foolishness!" said he, with something like asperity. He looked at me, contemptively.

"Not that I believe in such things, you must understand. Still, a man sees a good many things in these islands, in a lifetime, you know! Well, the Black People—" Mr. Bonesteel looked apprehensively about him, as though reluctant to have one of his clerks overhear what he was about to say, and leaned toward me from his chair, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"They said,—it was a remark here and a kind of hint there, you must understand; nothing definite,—that Morris had interfered, down there in Martinique, with some of their queer doings—offended the Zombi, something of the kind; that Morris had made some kind of conditions—oh, it was very vague, and probably all mixed up!—you know, whereby he was to have a long life and all the money he wanted,—something like that,—and afterward . . .

"Well, Mr. Stewart, you just ask somebody, sometime about Morris' death." Not another word about Old Morris could I extract out of Mr. Bonesteel.

But of course he had me aroused. I tried Despard, who lives on the other end of the island, a man educated at the Sorbonne, and who knows, it is said, everything there is to know about the island and its affairs.

It was much the same with Mr. Despard, who is an entirely different kind

of person; younger, for one thing, than my old friend the government surveyor.

Mr. Despard smiled, a kind of wry smile. "Old Morris!" said he, reflectively, and paused.

"Might I venture to ask—no offense, my dear sir!—why you wish to rake up such an old matter as Old Morris' death?"

I was a bit nonplussed, I confess. Mr. Despard had been perfectly courteous, as he always is, but, somehow, I had not expected such an intervention on his part.

"Why," said I, "I should find it hard to tell you, precisely, Mr. Despard. It is not that I am averse to being frank in the face of such an enquiry as yours, sir. I was not aware that there was anything important,—serious, as your tone implies,—about that matter. Put it down to mere curiosity if you will, and answer or not, as you wish, sir."

I was, perhaps, a little nettled at this unexpected, and as it then seemed to me, finicky obstruction being placed in my way. What could there be in such a case for this formal reticence,—these verbal safe-guards? If it were a "jumblec" story, there was no importance to it. If otherwise, well, I might be regarded by Despard as a person of reasonable discretion. Perhaps Despard was some relative of Old Morris, and there was something a bit off-color about his death. That, too, might account for Mr. Bonesteel's reticence.

"By the way," I enquired, noting Despard's reticence, "might I ask another question, Mr. Despard?"

"Certainly, Mr. Stewart."

"I do not wish to impress you as idly or unduly curious, but—are you and Mr. Bonesteel related in any way?"

"No, sir. We are not related in any way at all, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Despard," said I, and, bowing to each other after the fashion set here by the Dances, we parted.

I had not learned a thing about Old Morris' death.

I went in to see Mrs. Heidenklang. Here, if anywhere, I should find out what was intriguing me.

Mrs. Heidenklang is an ancient Creole lady, relict of a prosperous store-keeper, who lives, surrounded by a certain state of her own, propped up in bed in an environment of a stupendous quantity of lacy things and gauzy ruffles. I did not intend to mention Old Morris to her, but only to get some information about the Zombi, if that should be possible.

I found the old lady, surrounded by her ruffles and lace things, in one of her good days. Her health has been precarious for twenty years!

It was not difficult to get her talking about the Zombi.

"Yes," said Mrs. Heidenklang, "it is extraordinary how the old beliefs and the old words cling in their minds! Why, Mr. Stewart, I was hearing about a trial in the police court a few days ago. One old Black woman had summoned another for abusive language. On the witness stand the complaining old woman said: 'She cahl me a wuthless ole Cartagene, sir!' Now, think of that! Carthage was destroyed 'way back in the days of Cato the Elder, you know, Mr. Stewart! The greatest town of all Africa. To be a Carthaginian,



meant to be a sea-robber,—a pirate; that is, a thief. One old woman on this island, more than two thousand years afterward, wishes to call another a thief, and the word 'Cartagene' is the word she naturally uses! I suppose that has persisted on the West Coast and throughout all those village dialects in Africa without a break, all these centuries! The Zombi of the French islands? Yes, Mr. Stewart. There are some extraordinary beliefs. Why, perhaps you've heard mention made of Old Morris, Mr. Stewart. He used to live in your house, you know?"

I held my breath. Here was a possible trove. I nodded my head. I did not dare to speak!

"Well, Old Morris, you see, lived most of his earlier days in Martinique, and, it is said, he had a somewhat adventurous life there, Mr. Stewart. Just what he did or how he got himself involved, seems never to have been made clear, but—in some way, Mr. Stewart, the Black People believe, Morris got himself involved with a very powerful 'Jumbee,' and that is where what I said about the persistence of ancient beliefs comes in. Look on that table there, among those photographs, Mr. Stewart. There! that's the place. I wish I were able to get up and assist you. These maids! Everything askew, I have no doubt! Do you observe a kind of fish-headed thing, about as big as the palm of your hand? Yes! that is it!"

I found the "fish-headed thing" and carried it over to Mrs. Heidenklang. She took it in her hand and looked at it. It lacked a nose, but otherwise it was intact, a strange, uncouth-looking little godling, made of anciently polished volcanic stone, with huge, protruding eyes, small, humanlike ears, and what must have been a nose like a Tortola jackfish, or a black witch-bird, with its parrot beak.

"Now that," continued Mrs. Heidenklang, "is one of the very ancient household gods of the aborigines of Martinique, and you will observe the likeness in the idea to the *Lares* and *Penates* of your school-Latin days. Whether this is a *lar* or a *penate*, I can not tell," and the old lady paused to smile at her little joke, "but at any rate he is a representation of something very powerful,—a fish-god of the Caribs. There's something Egyptian about the idea, too, I've always suspected; and, Mr. Stewart, a Carib or an Arawak Indian,—there were both in these islands, you know,—looked much like an ancient Egyptian; perhaps half like your Zuni or Aztec Indians, and half Egyptian, would be a fair statement of his appearance. These fish-gods had men's bodies, you see, precisely like the hawk-headed and jackal-headed deities of ancient Egypt."

"It was one of those, the Black People say, with which Mr. Morris got himself mixed up,—'Gahd knows' as they say—how! And, Mr. Stewart, they say, his death was terrible! The particulars I've never heard, but my father knew, and he was sick for several days, after seeing Mr. Morris' body. Extraordinary, isn't it? And when are you coming this way again, Mr. Stewart? Do drop in and call on an old lady."

I felt that I was progressing.

The next time I saw Mr. Bonesteel, which was that very evening, I stopped him on the street and asked for a word with him.

"What was the date, or the approximate date, Mr. Bonesteel, of Mr. Morris' death? Could you recall that, sir?"

Mr. Bonesteel paused and considered.

"It was just before Christmas," said he. "I remember it not so much by Christmas as by the races, which always take place the day after Christmas. Morris had entered his sorrel mare Santurce, and, as he left no heirs, there was no one who 'owned' Santurce, and she had to be withdrawn from the races. It affected the betting very materially and a good many persons were annoyed about it, but there wasn't anything that could be done."

I thanked Mr. Bonesteel, and not without reason, for his answer had fitted into something that had been growing in my mind. Christmas was only eight days off. This drama of the furniture and Old Morris getting into bed, I had thought (and not unnaturally, it seems to me), might be a kind of re-enactment of the tragedy of his death. If I had the courage to watch, night after night, I might be relieved of the necessity of asking any questions. I might witness whatever had occurred, in some weird reproduction, engineered, God knows how!

For three nights now, I had seen the phenomenon of Old Morris getting into bed repeated, and each time it was clearer. I had sketched him into my drawing, a short, squat figure, rather stooped and fat, but possessed of a strange gorillalike energy. His movements, as he walked toward the bed, seized the edge of the mosquito-netting and climbed in, were, somehow, full of power, which was the more apparent since these were ordinary motions. One could not help imagining that Old Morris would have been a tough customer to tackle, for all his alleged age!

This evening, at the hour when this phenomenon was accustomed to enact itself, that is, about eleven o'clock, I watched again. The scene was very much clearer, and I observed something I had not noticed before. Old Morris' *muscularum* paused just before seizing the edge of the netting, raised its eyes, and began, with its right hand, a motion precisely like one who is about to sign himself with the cross. The motion was abruptly arrested, however, only the first of the four touches on the body being made.

I saw, too, something of the expression of the face that night, for the first time. At the moment of making the arrested sign, it was one of despairing horror. Immediately afterward, as this motion appeared to be abandoned for the abrupt clutching of the lower edge of the mosquito-net, it changed into a look of ferocious stubbornness, of almost savage self-confidence. I lost the facial expression as the appearance sank down upon the bed and pulled the ghostly bedclothes over itself.

Three nights later, when all this had become as greatly intensified as had the clearing-up process that had affected the furniture, I observed another motion, or what might be taken for the faint foreshadowing of another motion. This was not on the part of Old Morris. It made itself apparent as lightly and elusively as the swift flight of a moth across the reflection of a lamp, over near the bedroom door (the doors in my house are more than ten feet high, in fourteen-foot-high-walls), a mere flicker of something,—something entering the room. I looked, and peered at that corner, straining my

eyes, but nothing could I see save what I might describe as an intensification of the black shadow in that corner near the door, vaguely formed like a slim human figure, though grossly out of all human proportions. The vague shadow looked purple against the black. It was about ten feet high, and otherwise as though cast by an incredibly tall, thin human being.

I made nothing of it then; and again, despite all this cumulative experience with the strange shadows of my bedroom, attributed this last phenomenon to my eyes. It was too vague to be at that time accounted otherwise than as a mere subjective effect.

But the night following, I watched for it at the proper moment in the sequence of Old Morris' movements as he got into bed, and this time it was distinctly clearer. The shadow, it was, of some monstrous shape, ten feet tall, long, angular, of vaguely human appearance, though even in its merely shadowed form, somehow cruelly, strangely inhuman! I can not describe the cold horror of its realization. The head-part was, relatively to the proportions of the body, short and broad, like a pumpkin head of a "man" made of sticks by boys, to frighten powers-by on Halloween.

The next evening I was out again to an entertainment at the residence of one of my hospitable friends, and arrived home after midnight. There stood the ghostly furniture, there on the bed was the form of the apparently sleeping Old Morris, and there in the corner stood the shadow, little changed from last night's appearance.

The next night would be pretty close to the date of Old Morris' death. It would be that night, or the next at latest, according to Mr. Bonesteel's statement. The next day I could not avoid the sensation of something impending!

I entered my room and turned off the lights a little before eleven, seated myself, and waited.

The furniture tonight was, to my vision, absolutely indistinguishable from reality. This statement may sound somewhat strange, for it will be remembered that I was sitting in the dark. Approximating terms again, I may say, however, that the furniture was visible in a light of its own, a kind of "phosphorescence," which apparently emanated from it. Certainly there was no natural source of light. Perhaps I may express the matter thus: that light and darkness were *reversed* in the case of this ghostly bed, bureau, wardrobe, and chairs. When actual light was turned on, they disappeared. In darkness, which, of course, is the absence of physical light, they emerged. That is the nearest I can get to it. At any rate, tonight the furniture was entirely, perfectly, visible to me.

Old Morris came in at the usual time. I could see him with a clarity exactly comparable to what I have said about the furniture. He made his slight pause, his arrested motion of the right hand, and then, as usual, cast from him, according to his expression, the desire for that protective gesture, and reached a hard looking, gnarled fist out to take hold of the mosquito-netting.

As he did so, a fearful thing leaped upon him, a thing out of the corner by the high doorway,—the dreadful, purple shadow-thing. I had not been looking in that direction, and while I did not forgeten this newest of the strange items in this fantasmagoria which had been repeating itself before

my eyes for many nights, I was wholly unprepared for its sudden appearance and malignant activity.

I have said the shadow was purplish against black. Now that it had taken form, as the furniture and Old Morris himself had taken form, I observed that this purplish coloration was actual. It was a glowering, humanlike, almost metallic-appearing thing, certainly ten feet high, completely covered with great, iridescent fish-scales, each perhaps four square inches in area, which shimmered as it leaped across the room. I saw it for only a matter of a second or two. I saw it clutch surely and with a deadly malignity, the hunched body of Old Morris, from behind, just, you will remember, as the old man was about to climb into his bed. The dreadful thing turned him about as a wasp turns a fly, in great, flail-like, glistening arms, and never, to the day of my death, do I ever expect to be free of the look on Old Morris' face—a look of a lost soul who knows that there is no hope for him in this world or the next,—as the great, squat, rounded head, a head precisely like that of Mrs. Heidenklang's little fish-pumice, descended, revealing to my horrified sight one glimpse of a huge, scythe-like parrot-bill which it used, with a nodding motion of the ugly head, to plunge into its writhing victim's breast, with a tearing motion like the barracuda when it attacks and tears. . . .

I fainted then, for that was the last of the fearful picture which I can remember.

I awakened a little after one o'clock, in a dark and empty room, peopled by no ghosts, and with my own, more commonplace, mahogany furniture thinly outlined in the faint light of the new moon which was shining clearly in a starry sky. The fresh night-wind stirred the setting of my bed. I rose, shakily, and went and leaned out of the window, and lit and puffed rapidly at a cigarette, which perhaps did something to settle my jangling nerves.

The next morning, with a feeling of loathing which has gradually worn itself out in the course of the months which have now elapsed since my dreadful experience, I took up my drawing again, and added as well as I could the fearful scene I had witnessed. The completed picture was a horror, crude as is my work in this direction. I wanted to destroy it, but I did not, and I laid it away under some unused clothing in one of the large drawers of my bedroom wardrobe.

Three days later, just after Christmas, I observed Mr. Despard's car driving through the streets, the driver being alone. I stopped the boy and asked him where Mr. Despard was at the moment. The driver told me Mr. Despard was having breakfast,—the West Indian midday meal,—with Mr. Bonesteel at that gentleman's house on the Prince's Cross Street. I thanked him and went home. I took out the drawing, balled it, and placed it in the inside breast pocket of my coat, and started for Bonesteel's house.

I arrived fifteen minutes or so before the breakfast hour, and was pleasantly received by my old friend and his guest. Mr. Bonesteel pressed me to join them at breakfast, but I declined.

Mr. Bonesteel brought in a swizzle, compounded of his very old rum, and after partaking of this in ceremonious fashion, I engaged the attention of both gentlemen.

"Gentlemen," said I, "I trust that you will not regard me as too much of a bore, but I have, I believe, a legitimate reason for asking you if you will tell me the manner in which the gentleman known as Old Morris, who once occupied my house, met his death."

I stopped there, and immediately discovered that I had thrown my kind old host into a state of embarrassed confusion. Glancing at Mr. Despard, I saw at once that if I had not actually offended him, I had, by my question, at least put him "on his dignity." He was looking at me severely, rather, and I confess that for a moment I felt a bit like a schoolboy. Mr. Bonesteel caught something of this atmosphere, and looked helplessly at Despard. Both men shifted uneasily in their chairs; each waited for the other to speak.

Despard, at last, cleared his throat.

"You will excuse me, Mr. Stewart," said he, slowly, "but you have asked a question which for certain reasons, no one, aware of the circumstances, would desire to answer. The reasons are, briefly, that Mr. Morris, in certain respects, was—what shall I say, not to do the matter an injustice?—well, perhaps I might say he was abnormal. I do not mean that he was crazy. He was, though, eccentric. His end was such that stating it would open up a considerable argument, one which agitated this island for a long time after he was found dead. By a kind of general consent, that matter is taboo on the island. That will explain to you why no one wishes to answer your question. I am free to say that Mr. Bonesteel here, in considerable distress, told me that you had asked it of him. You also asked me about it not long ago. I can add only that the manner of Mr. Morris' end was such that—" Mr. Despard hesitated, and looked down, a frown on his brow, at his shoe, which he tapped nervously on the tiled floor of the gallery where we were seated.

"Old Morris, Mr. Stewart," he resumed, after a moment's reflection, in which, I imagined, he was carefully choosing his words, "was, to put it plainly, murdered! There was much discussion over the identity of the murderer, but the most of it, the unpleasant part of the discussion, was rather whether he was killed by human agency or not! Perhaps you will see now, sir, the difficulty of the matter. To admit that he was murdered by an ordinary murderer is, to my mind, an impossibility. To assert that some other agency, something abhuman, killed him, opens up the question of one's belief, one's credulity. 'Magic' and occult agencies are, as you are aware, strongly entrenched in the minds of the ignorant people of these islands. None of us cares to admit a similar belief. Does that satisfy you, Mr. Stewart, and will you let the matter rest there, sir?"

I drew out the picture, and, without unfolding it, laid it across my knees. I nodded to Mr. Despard, and, turning to our host, asked:

"As a child, Mr. Bonesteel, were you familiar with the arrangement of Mr. Morris' bedroom?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mr. Bonesteel, and added: "Everybody was! Persons who had never been in the old man's house, crowded in when—" I intercepted a kind of warning look passing from Despard to the speaker. Mr. Bonesteel, looking much embarrassed, looked at me in that helpless fashion I have already mentioned, and remarked that it was hot weather these days!

"Then," said I, "perhaps you will recognize its arrangement and even some of the details of its furnishing," and I unfolded the picture and handed it to Mr. Bonesteel.

If I had anticipated its effect upon the old man, I would have been more discreet, but I confess I was nettled by their attitude. By handing it to Mr. Bonesteel (I could not give it to both of them at once) I did the natural thing, for he was our host. The old man looked at what I had handed him, and (this is the only way I can describe what happened!) became, suddenly, as though petrified. His eyes bulged out of his head, his lower jaw dropped and hung open. The paper slipped from his nerveless grasp and fluttered and zigzagged to the floor, landing at Despard's feet. Despard stooped and picked it up, ostensibly to restore it to me, but in doing so, he glanced at it, and had *his* reaction. He leaped frantically to his feet, and positively goggled at the picture, then at me. Oh, I was having my little revenge for their reticence, right enough!

"My God!" shouted Despard. "My God, Mr. Stewart, where did you get such a thing?"

Mr. Bonesteel drew in a deep breath, the first, it seemed, for sixty seconds, and added his word.

"Oh my God!" muttered the old man, shakily. "Mr. Stewart, Mr. Stewart! what is it, what is it? where—"

"It is a Martinique fish-zombie, what is known to professional occult investigators like Elliott O'Donnell and William Hope Hodgson as an 'elemental,'" I explained, calmly. "It is a representation of how poor Mr. Morris actually met his death; until now, as I understood it, a purely conjectural matter. Christiansted is built on the ruins of French Bassin, you will remember," I added. "It is a very likely spot for an 'elemental'!"

"But, but," almost shouted Mr. Despard, "Mr. Stewart, where did you get this, its—"

"I made it," said I, quietly, folding up the picture and placing it back in my inside pocket.

"But how—?" this from both Despard and Bonesteel, speaking in unison.

"I saw it happen, you see," I replied, taking my hat, bowing formally to both gentlemen, and murmuring my regret at not being able to remain for breakfast, I departed.

And as I reached the bottom of Mr. Bonesteel's gallery steps and turned along the street in the direction of Old Morris' house, where I live, I could hear their voices speaking together:

"But how, how—?" This was Bonesteel.

"Why, why—?" And that was Despard.

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